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The Island of Taradata is ruled over by the mysterious Palaga family—who used to be pirates.

The island's 'industry' now is exporting coracles to America.

Why?

April and Mark are sent to investigate.

They enlist the aid of the curious Chas, and uncover a particularly nasty THRUSH plot.

The evil organisation's weapon this time is the common cold.

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THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

No3

The Golden Boats of Taradata Affair

Simon Latter

Based on the dramatic MGM-ARENA T.V. series starring Stephanie Powers and Noel Harrison

CHAPTER ONE: TIME WAS AND IS

MANUEL PALAGA was a pirate. Ruthless, efficiently calculating all odds against him, hedging his risks, never overreaching himself, trusting no one person though appearing to trust all. He worked the cargo runs around the islands, extended to the African coast, created a network of spies and sources of information as detailed as those of a modern tax collector.

When Palaga ordered his ships out from their hidden coves and bays, he knew to the last golden piece exactly the value of his intended victims. Few failures are recorded, but he was the only pirate captain ever to give his cutthroat crews as high a reward for failure as for success. But if one ship of his fleet of pirateers seemed to be too often unlucky in its efforts, its captain and officers disappeared, the crew being dispersed to other ships.

Those were not the glamorous days so many writers of history have claimed them to be. Most pirates ended their careers by being hanged and quartered, murdered by their own crews or in drunken orgies ashore. But not Manuel Palaga. Murderer and ruffian he undoubtedly was, and no chivalrous upholder of the rights of women. He is believed to have been married and is on record as admitting paternity of at least twenty-four children between 1790 and 1820, though his legal wife died childless.

For the latter twenty of those thirty years, Palaga was shore-based, which accounts not only for certain obvious sexual activities but also for his good health during a period when other pirate captains were suffering from stretched necks and similar hazards of their then overcrowded profession.

Manuel Palaga did in fact become a pirate of the pirates, but not upon the high seas. He had based himself on the shores of a white-sand bay which had a natural harbour of flame-pink coral. The land was lush in its semi-tropical climate, having abundant fresh fruit, root crops and water. It also had periodic hurricanes, but none worse than the storms Palaga and his ship had survived at sea.

He had been resting his crew, replenishing his ship's stores and counting his own piracy spoils when another pirate ship sailed into the bay. Palaga promptly invited the captain and officers ashore, gave them to understand he had been granted governing rights of this

island with its pleasant bays and coves, and charged them harbour dues. When they refused to pay, he accused them of piracy, held a mock court and hanged them all.

His men emptied their ship of its pirated cargo, bound its crew to their own masts and set the ship on fire. But Palaga's men had overlooked a number of kegs of gun powder. When the flames reached below-decks the vessel went up in a million flaring pieces. It also raised a huge curving wall of coral in great chunks, and in so doing cleared a deep channel through which even large ships could enter the bay in safety. Skilled engineers could not have made a more perfect deep-water harbour.

Palaga built wharfs, erected storage sheds, and from 1810 to 1820 created a township, its staple industry based upon trade with all seagoing craft. He sold fresh water, fruit, vegetables and other supplies. He bought pirated goods at his own prices from pirates already harried by a growing number of British, American, French and Spanish patrol ships and obtained contracts to service and supply the patrol ships, selling to them — at high prices — many of the goods stolen from cargo ships they had failed to protect on the high seas. From this trade grew the more solid import-export business which, for fifty years, made the island, for its size, one of the richest in the world.

After a lifetime of pillaging, murder, extortion, rape, arson, blackmail, forgery and the building of a city, Manuel Palaga was peacefully paddling with some of his favourite children when he stepped on a stone fish and died in agony half an hour later.

There was no lack of heirs to his fortune, nor to his leadership, the island being known as "the island of a thousand bastards".

The island is, for that matter, still known by this description, though its people long ago corrected Manuel's oversight and brought in a few priests to restore some until then unobserved moral values. Among the islands, indeed, the name of Palaga is synonymous with bastard, but on the island itself it now represents the creme-de-la-creme of society, with Palaga City the core, the hub, the crown, the whatever-it-is-we've-got-the-most of its own special self.

Palaga is a name on the airline maps, the lush venue of the luxury liners, the homing place for ships sailing under its high-priced flag of convenience, the clearing house for drugs, the exchange mart for diamond and gold smugglers, a free port — and the island claims to

possess the most beautiful shoreline in the world. It is, in fact, back in the piracy business, the sole difference being that the victims come to the pirates with a gleam in their eyes, a smile on their lips and cash in their pockets.

Some visitors are sunk without trace. Palaga has a fine hospital service, abounds with luxury clinics specializing in high-cost illnesses whose doctors all cooperate with the police department.

The Palaga police are unique. Other police forces in the world have their quota of regrettable corruption. In Palaga, all the police are corrupt. As most of their customers are also this way inclined, this makes for an amicable understanding between them. The set-up enables inquests to function smoothly and swiftly, and suitable death certificates are issued without messy details.

In the old days, pirates seldom took prisoners unless they could be made to work. Nor does modern Palaga. The "plank" is still walked — back on to a ship or on to an aircraft — quick, slick and no argument. Drunks are sobered at a clinic, the fees being extracted from their wallets or belongings. There are no beggars or shanty hovels housing an illiterate poor, because there are no poor. Visitors must show an exceptionally large sum of cash or deposited credits. This tends to keep down the harpies, prostitutes and husband-hunters because the Palaganians practise full equality of the sexes — money-wise. They have a swelegant sufficiency of their own beautiful women, and visas to lone women are granted only after substantial cash deposits have been made in the Palaga City Bank.

The police in many large cities often allow certain clubs to remain open because they know the underworld makes use of them. It is easier to sweep a net through "usual haunts" and this saves time and manpower in searching a thousand odd hidey-holes. In relation to International Law Enforcement working through its many organizations, Palaga is in the same category. A couple of bombs would blow it off the map; a combined boycott or world-enforced sanctions might kill it; an outlawing of its currency would strangle most of its activities. But it is an island of beauty in the sun. Many a jaded police chief has enjoyed its hospitality while connecting up the activities of a crime syndicate. Politicians use it as neutral territory for close-huddled conferences. Spy-catchers and spy-matchers follow tracks through Palaga with the regularity of commuters. It is the sun and fun run, the seek and hide glide, the X-marks-the spot lot, the sublime clime for the climb sublime.

Flows the aquamarine sea calm-rippled between the flaming coral arms, shave-foam breakers on the silver sands, back-dropped by endless-varied colour, stepping over sculptured, awning-eyed hotels, emerald lawns fronting apartment houses with flower-rich fountain-played sun terraces. Houses of all styles, chateau, hacienda, ranch, baroque and arabesque, mosque and minaret — you name it, we've got it — dapple the olive hills, flared windows vying with the brilliant stars, throwing a rainbow halo up to the feet of Climb Sublime.

Here are the feet also of Manuel Palaga, the pirate founder of Palaga, whose steel and stone figure rises two hundred feet from the top of Climb Sublime. By taxi it costs two hundred dollars to reach the observation gardens around these precious feet. Another two hundred dollars to travel in the lift to the terraces upon his shoulders. All the taxis are owned by families bearing the Palaga name. No private cars are allowed.

It is more expensive by hearse. The heels of Manuel Palaga house the crematorium. The cheapest ride costs five thousand dollars. But the send-off is terrific. They say there are things in the head of Manuel Palaga. Things that whirr and whine and click, and at night the eyes glow and tiny sparks of blue lightning dance a halo around the pirate's head.

Across the plinth of this massive monument to piracy, a plinth the size of a city square, in great gold letters is the motto of the House of Palaga — a free translation of which is: "Time was and is."

Many have conjectured as to its true meaning, for the words themselves do not make much sense unless put into some related context. But the present heads of the Palaga family — quiet-living, enormously rich, and as poker-faced as any of their croupiers in the island's many gambling casinos — merely smile, shrug their elegantly garbed shoulders and build another vault in the bowels of the mountain behind the city to hold the millions of currency pouring into their coffers from visitors from the outside world.

There is no income tax on Palaga — nor does their language contain the word tax — no civil servants. All public utilities are owned by a branch of the Palaga family. It seems they have evolved the ideal way of governing without government, so platoons of non-productive, graft-ridden compilers of forms, licenses, permits and other bunff which choke the arteries of other nations do not exist on Palaga.

The children are educated primarily in small classes, and all those

bearing the name Palaga are sent to leading schools in America, Europe, Russia, China and India. Families of non-Palaga names and descent are subjected to birth control of an unusual nature. If they produce more than two children, the whole family is immediately "exported" to any country they may choose and given sufficient capital to make them welcome there. Likewise, any non-Palaganian over the age of sixty is "exported" as a pensioner to the West Indies or the Bahamas or even to Florida, indeed, to any place they like, and their generous pension makes them welcome anywhere.

Thus there is no over-population, and any under-population threat is swiftly dealt with by the virile Palagas whose otherwise illegitimate children are given their name, the mother given the choice of being sterilized and having a good life on the island or becoming an "export".

There are many other facets of Palaganian society which may seem strange — even barbarous — to the outsider. But all of these, if assessed calmly, can be seen to be very similar to the type of society originally maintained by the pirate Manuel Palaga.

All who enter the several harbours of Palaga have had to pay a fee before setting sail from their home port. Chance callers are stopped by gunboats which constantly patrol Palaga waters. Not only a pirate policy but also a highwayman policy of "Stand and deliver" is strictly enforced.

There are many other islands within a few days' sailing. Most of these do not have airports, and the helicopter is not encouraged on Palaga which, due to its strategic position, is a main supplier to all the other islands up to two hundred miles distant. Some small cargo-passenger boats are allowed to use the trade harbours — on the other side of the island from the glorious flame-coral harbour and bay below Palaga City — for reasons which suit the Palagas as a family but which are not disclosed to outsiders. Ships carrying the Palaganian flag of convenience are not encouraged to clutter up the Palaganian ports.

The pleasure-seeking visitor to Palaga, once issued with a visa based upon a cash deposit or the purchase of Palaganian currency, is assured of the best of luxury, attention, courtesy and facility, plus the beauty of a climate unequalled anywhere in the world. Palaga also guarantees the safety of their person and property. No doors need be locked. Purses can be left around on beaches, in bars, clubs and hotels.

Every Palaganian is a self-appointed policeman.

Some international crooks, drooling over thoughts of lush pickings, got themselves a cash stake enabling them to get on the island, and then went to work. All died from various legitimate causes, which were made clear on a Palaganian doctor's certificate, finishing up in the heels of Manuel Palaga. Their bone meal now enriches the fields and vineyards beyond the mountain.

Business visitors have to be sponsored by at least two of the senior family of Palaga, themselves great travellers who go in the guise of trade commissions to arrange imports and other Palaga business. But those who are approved, such as architects, engineers and others of that kind, do their business in such luxury and with such lavish facilities that life back home leaves them dissatisfied for months after their return.

This detailed preamble on Palaga is very necessary because unless one understands at least these facts, one cannot appreciate the island's importance to certain world undercover organizations. Palaga attends to minute detail yet does not concern itself with small matters, small people or small causes. It doesn't want boatloads of retired teachers "doing" the islands on economy cruises, nor itinerate artists seeking local colour or students hiking their way around the world. If any do slip through, they run out of money fast and are thereupon whisked over the mountain and dumped on a cargo boat before they can even send a postcard home. In fact, mail is vetted meticulously by the most modern methods, and as all languages can be understood, owing to the international schooling system, Palaga sees all and knows about what is written in letters to and from the island.

U.N.C.L.E. had to learn all these details, and many more besides, and then relay them to April Dancer, Mark Slate and others, before they dared risk sending these agents to Palaga to probe rumours and disturbing yet apparently unconnected facts which had filtered through to New York headquarters from this part of the world.

It had been tough for April Dancer to reach her present status as an U.N.C.L.E. agent. A long time learning and a time testing and being tested. And, after all that, the realization that each assignment brought its own high-pressure spate of learning. The lessons were endless, the knowledge never really sufficient in a world where knowledge and preparedness ran a perpetual race — each destroying the other so that every new case was a starter on a fresh track.

Only the hidden adversary remained the same — the vast, wealthy and powerful THRUSH organization. Yet its agents were constantly

changing, as were its areas of endeavour. Only its aim could be accepted always as unchanged — the aim of world domination by any means whatsoever. So in each case the objective was known. It was the means which had to be discovered, then remorselessly destroyed.

"Palaga, Miss Dancer — you know it?" Mr. Waverly had said.

"I know of it, sir. A lush playground for the wealthy. I've heard it called a paradise — an Eden."

"Quite so. And you, if I may say so, would make an excellent Eve within its exotic boundaries. It is, however, very much more than just a paradise." Mr. Waverly had passed her a thick file. "Read, mark, learn, inwardly digest, then read again and yet again. The file covers not only Palaga but also the islands up to two hundred miles south and east of it. You have twenty hours to become word perfect and to pull in fittings with our costume department, for you will require an extensive wardrobe. Also more money than you have ever before been allocated on one case. A fact that is driving the accounts department into a state of mild apoplexy. Let us reassure them by the brilliance of your assimilated knowledge."

"Why can't I be lush and lovely?" Mark Slate had exclaimed.

"Oh, but you are — in your own horrible way," April had said.

"Jealousy, Mr. Slate, will get you no place," Mr. Waverly had reproved.

"Except on some stinking cargo boat. Oh well — what's money and beauty and lush living compared with virility and superb intelligence?" Mark had grinned at April. "Wanna swop?"

"No swops." Mr. Waverly had dismissed them both. "Go, you, too — and learn likewise."

So they had studied their required knowledge, separately, then had joined to merge knowledge with intent, and intent with procedure, and procedure with objective. All of which brought April Dancer — lushly lovely, exquisitely apparelled, with a visitor's deposit of cash money large enough to choke two donkeys — to a sun bed beneath a flared umbrella on the whiter-than-white sands of Palaga Bay.

Complete, of course, with escort. One Orlando Four Palaga. You judged the society rating of any Palaga family by their middle name, which always was a number. When you got down to the twenties you

were nearing the menial grades of the Palagas. But even these were important people, and all genuine visitors could trust them. Give an Orlando Twenty-six Palaga your wallet and say: "Hold this while I have a swim," and he would be holding it when you returned. He also would be holding a long, cool drink for which he had paid. And not a postage stamp would be missing from your wallet. Put a hair between the folds, and you would find it intact, the wallet unopened even to satisfy human curiosity.

The Palagas didn't need to use such fiddling tricks. And anyway, the maids, porters, waiters, interpreters, escorts or receptionists in your hotel or apartment house already had, in their own way, searched, recorded and photographed everything you possessed. Such work was all kept in the family, anyway. Why make it more obvious and spoil your holiday?

Which made it difficult if the normal contents of your purse and vanity case included U.N.C.L.E. communicator, special radios and miniature TV contacts built into powder compacts, or an eyelash container, or tooth-paste tubes; and lipsticks that served as knock-out injectors, nail files that could open locks or double as safe combination calculators; not forgetting the most effective U.N.C.L.E. sleep-gun, the golden charm bangle full of spare bugging devices, a comb that could be turned into a stiletto, and sundry buttons and brooches to fit on suits or gowns that recorded or relayed voices to a companion up to a mile away.

Packets of chewing gum, too, were innocent enough unless the searchers knew that by chewing them for a certain time they became a saliva-activated explosive of sufficient power to wreck a room or vehicle. There were also diamond earrings that could cut plate-glass, a cigarette lighter that could double as a steel-cutting torch, and other items not normally included in the holiday gear of wealthy lush-lovely young ladies.

The U.N.C.L.E. file so carefully studied by April Dancer gave detailed information about the Palaganian checking system, so much ingenious thought had to be given into devising different ways and means for the agent to carry her necessary field equipment.

As she lay her bronzed loveliness on the flower-gay sun bed she was not, apparently, much different from other lush lovelies lazing beneath the coloured umbrellas. Many had local escort companions, others had new husbands or old boyfriends. But it would be safe to assume that April Dancer was the only lovely wearing a miniscule bra

with a built-in TV sending/receiving aerial, a necklace throat mike and a solid gold portable TV set in the shape of a compact. By resting her shoulder casually against the sun bed's steel frame she could have achieved a strong enough signal to transmit through the Early Bird Two Satellite.

Orlando knew nothing of these things. He knew only the pattern of love-making prescribed for such visitors and performed his work with trained precision. His caresses were just right — not too far but far enough — his kisses warmly languorous, his manners impeccable, his attentions devout. At three hundred dollars per twenty-four hours — less if the night was for sleeping alone — plus all expenses paid, he was not expensive.

Palaganian men were not tall, but they were lithe, bright-eyed, olive-skinned and muscular. They tanned to a glowing brown and had enough body hair to suggest virility. If not, they stuck some in the right places, should female visitors feel the need for such an assurance Orlando wasn't only a good specimen of muscle-boy. He'd had an expensive education, could speak seven languages, had run a less-than four-minute mile, was a high-dive champion and could ride as if grafted to the horse's back.

All in all a worthy companion for April Dancer, who herself was no mean exponent of languages, horse-riding, sports-car racing and the physical arts of fencing, karate and judo. In other circumstances she and Orlando could have really set the hours alight. But she also was an actress with a role to play. The role of the bored, rich-born lovely.

Which, she felt, was a great pity. But there, duty calls, she sighed.

"A long, cool drink," she murmured drowsily.

Orlando caressed her gently with practiced concentration.

April quivered, then knuckle-punched him in the stomach. She really did feel resentful. Orlando stirred sweet lust — which didn't mix with business.

"You choose the silliest times, Orlando!" She spoke lazily through a half-yawn. "A long, cool drink, huh?"

His eyes smiled at her, though his mouth had winced at the blow. He sensed a strange strength in this customer. She puzzled him.

"Ah, yes!" said Orlando, feathery fingers tracing the lines of her figure.

"A long, cool drink — but of course, at once."

"No hurry." She smiled. "You are always too quick, Orlando. Slow down, huh? Give a girl a chance to unwind. Take your time."

He sprang up — a gleaming brown Jack-in-the-box released from prison.

"I will be very slow. For you, very slow indeed. Then you will miss me more — as I shall miss you." Here was real corn with the ring of a crepe suzette, April thought.

April watched him go, extracted compact from beach bag, flicked it open, operated the hidden switch, leaned the band of her bra against the sun bed frame and spoke in her throat, lips scarcely moving. "Hear me," she said. "Hear me, Mark."

"And see you," said his voice as the tiny picture in the compact mirror came into focus. "Marvellous reception." He scowled. "Too good."

Not the usual debonair Mark Slate but burned bronze beneath scruffy face fungus, hair tangle-matted, greasy cap slanted over one ear.

"You look feelthy," said April. "Where, oh where is my debonair side-kick?"

Mark snarled, "Who's your pretty boy?"

She giggled. "You've been peeking. Orlando is a nice boy. He is also a contact for local THRUSH operatives. These Palaga hombres play both ends against the middle. Orlando is a grade four. I should hate to tangle with a grade one in this family set-up. In most family-inheritance outfits, the higher you go, the dumber they get. Not so here. Oh, brother, they are one talented bunch!"

"They must know THRUSH is operating here, surely?"

"Sure they must — and at astronomical deposit fees, you betcha; but are the Palagas with 'em? I doubt it. The only thing they're really with is another Palaga. I'd like out. All this talent is unnerving."

Mark grinned. "We aim to please. Your passage is booked on the *Island Traveller*. The Palaga cargo exit port allows you passage under their heading of 'eccentricities of the rich — to be humoured'. Only the poor never want to go slumming."

"'Is it as stinking a tub as it looks?"

"It is for the crew, but passenger quarters aren't bad. You'll survive."

"I always survive. What is the route?"

"Corn Island, Providencia, San Andres, a couple of other calls, and then the island of Taradata, before going back on the same route to pick up cargo."

"Is Lars Carlson with you? Has he made contact?"

"He's a slow and careful laddie, is Lars. I think the sun slows him down."

"More likely that belly dancer he met in what they call the Cargo Town over the mountain. I'm not completely isolated in this lush oasis, y'know."

"Tut-tut to you too! You've got Orlando. Lars has Maria. She's an ex of Captain Sidano, and he, but definitely, is THRUSH. By the way — Sama Paru and Count Kazan are out in the deep blue yonder some place."

"Air?"

"No, water. You are to contact Mr. Waverly. Randy Kovac has been doing some inspired map-reading."

"He would." April glanced up, to see Orlando approaching the beach. "I'll see you aboard. Over and out."

"Watch yourself, darling." Mark smiled as his image faded.

"You too, lover-boy," she said softly, then snapped the compact shut.

CHAPTER TWO: KEEPER OF A THOUSAND SECRETS

THE captain's cabin on the *Island Traveller* was a shade more luxurious than the old island-run tub would appear to boast. Recent luxuries too — such as a new bunk, electrical fittings, modern desk and other fitments, including a chrome-sparkling new radio built into a bulkhead below a large mirror.

Captain Sidano and Petrov Maleski, his first mate, sat staring at this

mirror. By their conversation it was clear that Maleski was the senior, despite his shipboard rank.

Sidano growled some complaint. Maleski said:

"Quiet — enough of your protests. Listen!"

The mirror flickered into a TV screen. The head and shoulders of a balding, bespectacled man appeared.

Sidano sat upright. "Good evening, Mr. Padrack. Shall we have the pleasure of your company this evening, sir?"

Padrack ignored this inquiry.

Maleski said sharply: "Do not waste time, Sidano. This is not very wise, Padrack." He used the tone of an equal. "We agreed not to make contact from shore except in dire emergency."

"You have an U.N.C.L.E. agent aboard. Would you not call that an emergency? It also is a form of carelessness which cannot be tolerated."

"This I cannot believe!" protested Maleski. "I screened every man through our local office. But, if it is true, then I agree it is a big mistake."

"All my crew are tough cut-throats," said Sidano, obviously pleased that Maleski — the arrogantly efficient Maleski — had been discovered at fault. "They are very easy to check through their last prison address." Sidano smirked.

"Quiet! " Maleski snapped. "Who is this man?"

"Carlson — Lars Carlson. He is using the name of Sven Telsen. Our agent C.47 found him."

"C.47!" Sidano gasped. "That is Maria! It is a trick, Mr. Padrack. A jealous woman causing trouble."

"Yes," said Padrack curtly. "For you. That I do not mind. You should learn to keep your women out of your business, Captain. It is fortunate for you that Maria is one of our most loyal agents."

"But I dropped her when I discovered she was one of your agents," Sidano said angrily. "And I personally collected Telsen — or Carlson, as you call him — from the prison on the mainland. How can he be an

U.N.C.L.E. agent? He was serving fifteen years for robbery and armed assault. He had beaten up three prison guards. It cost me two thousand to get him paroled to me. No, sir — Maria is mistaken."

"I would find your faith in what is told you to be most touching, were it not that you are an imbecile," said Pad- rack coldly. "Was not Carlson transferred from another prison only three weeks before you visited the mainland?"

"Yes — because he was violent."

"Pah!" Maleski snorted. "That is an old trick. I would have been very suspicious, myself, if I had known."

"So clever, you are!" said Sidano. "You know it all — after it has happened!"

"His record was faked," said Padrack. "Carlson was never in any other prison. He was planted there for you to pick, and you fell for it. You will now get rid of him — at once. You understand? Maleski, I hold you responsible."

"Yes," said Maleski. "There will be no more mistakes. You are coming aboard?"

"Very soon." The screen went blank as Padrack broke contact.

Way up in the old-fashioned rigging of the *Island Traveller*, Mark Slate listened in to the conversation in the captain's cabin. Tapping into the ship's aerial circuit with a new U.N.C.L.E. device had saved much risk for himself and Lars. The crew were as tough a bunch as he'd ever met, but few of them were very experienced seamen, so when Mark had shown willingness to climb aloft to tend the necessary work there, no one had protested.

Lars worked in the galley and, more often than not, was alone, so their contact could be maintained without it being obvious they were friendly. Mark now operated the switch embedded in the large buckle of his broad leather belt and, when he heard Lars open the circuit, spoke into the ring mike on his finger.

"Ya, me?" said Lars.

"Ya, you!" Mark chuckled. "Hear me. Vanish pronto before we sail. In fact — instanter. Maria has spotted you. Dunno how, but you'll be

shark meat if you stay."

"Bliddy women!" said Lars. "She ben saw my tattoo. Was done when I was field agent in Antarctica. So she must be THRUSH bird."

"THRUSH bird ben singing," said Mark. "Get going, my sexful Swede. I'll try to cover you if there's trouble. Contact H.Q. when you're clear. April is due aboard soon. Go now."

"Ya — I go."

Trouble there was. Mark had a crow's-nest view. Lars emerged on deck, heading for the gangway. Four hefty crew men advanced on him from for'ard. Three more were amid ships, closing in from the stern. A Palaga taxi had just pulled up and April Dancer alighted from it. Behind the three men Maleski, gun in hand, stood a pace ahead of Sidano. Mark was a camera viewing a 3D scene.

Lars paused in midstep. Bronzed, blond cat-man — lithe, powerful, balanced to attack or defend. Mark moved fast, slipping knots, jerking stay-ropes on the heavy auxiliary block and tackle. The ropes hissed and whipped as the pulley crashed deckwards, smack among the three men amidships. It crunched on one shoulder and the man was spun back — into Maleski, the other two ensnared in writhing ropes.

Mark backed up his play — screaming curses, swaying at the end of the mast-arm, then springing out, clear in a tumbling dive into the water. Lars didn't look up, guessing Mark was covering him. The four other men were diverted, heads jerking up, eyes staring mastward as Lars leapt. His bunched fists swung like hammers and two men went flat on the deck and stayed there. Lars tangled with the other two, fists jabbing, hands chopping, until both men crumpled.

People were moving up the gangway. Lars ran to the rail, leapt up, poised, then took off, body angled as a low-loader truck came along the quayside. He plummeted into the load of copra, disappearing as Maleski cleared ropes and men to come within gun range.

April Dancer, seeing Mark aloft in the same moment Lars appeared on deck, recognized the signs of trouble. She ran to the gangway. Unfortunately her taxi driver, luggage- loaded, ready to give eager-beaver-service, dashed after her, so choking the gangway against Lars' escape and blocking her own way back.

She reached the head of. the gangway as Maleski was drawing careful aim at the truck. With a scream and a flurry of arms, she flung herself

from the gangway into Maleski's chest, hanging on to his neck. He staggered back, gun hand waving skyward, the other clamped around her waist — a natural reflex-action.

"That's dangerous!" she bleated. "Ever so dangerous." She leaned back, smiled into his eyes. "Lucky me! I'd have hurt myself if you hadn't caught me. Thank you so much!" She ignored the gun and the fury in his gaze. "You can put me down now, you naughty man."

At the stern a soaked figure clambered up from the anchor chain, sloshed on to deck and flip-flopped up to Captain Sidano.

"— —!" said Mark Slate, vigorously. "When are you going to spend some of the owner's money on new tackle? Don't you know that goddam rigging is half rotten? Blasted stinking old scow this is — call yourself a captain!" He let go a few more opinions until Sidano slashed a back hand across his face.

"Silence, you scum! You fell from the mast because you're a stupid, bungling fool. I shall dock one half of your pay for smashing that tackle. Now get aft and stand by to cast off."

Mark's eyes glittered, but he pretended to be cowed, as would any roughneck afraid of being returned to some stinking mainland prison.

"Got a right to complain, ain't I? Could've blasted well killed meself."

"That would be no loss," Sidano snarled, then walked onwards to greet April Dancer.

"Poor man!" said April. "You were very hard on him. After all, he did dive into the sea!"

"They have no feelings, miss," said Sidano. "Like animals, they are. Don't waste your pity on them."

Mark slouched past them. April smiled at him. "That was a wonderful dive."

He surveyed her coolly — undressing her with insolent eyes.

"Yeah," he growled. "Think quick, act fast, trust nothing and no one around here. Thanks all the same, miss."

"All right," said Maleski. "Get aft…" He paused. "No — wait — you." He looked at Sidano. "The steward was deported yesterday. The fool

got drunk. His replacement hasn't shown up. This man has a little more class than the others."

Sidano shrugged. "A wash and shave and a white coat might make him presentable. Okay, you — get cleaned up and report to the purser."

"At stewards' pay?"

"We'll see."

"Fair's fair," whined Mark. "A man works well for the right pay."

Maleski pointed ashore, to where more taxis had pulled up. "Our other passengers are arriving, sir."

"You'll have what you earn," said Sidano to Mark. "Get below and clean yourself up."

"Aye, aye, sir." Mark went, and so missed an interesting scene.

April Dancer found this humorous, yet ominous. She knew of the Padracks. They were mentioned in the original Palaga report, as were many other names. Some were now identified as having THRUSH connections, some THRUSH sub-agents. This was the big difficulty when assigned to a carefully researched case. Better, really, to "go in cold", because then at least you got to know all your contacts.

H.Q., and mostly this meant Mr. Waverly, had a tendency to regard a research file as gospel for the guidance of the converted. U.N.C.L.E. agents were trained not to pre-judge situations they met with on their field of assignment. But if they accepted everything contained in those Top Secret dossiers, they automatically pre-judged and, in such pre-judging, became biased by the reports of researchers as well as unknown informants.

Reports contained many statements such as this:

"Padrack, Simon, aged forty-five, slim build, balding, quiet-spoken. Wears spectacles. Appears absentminded. Ex-teacher, Trinidad and Tobago, believed inherited money, set up as bookseller, also adviser on library supplies to island committees. No known political affiliations. Now retained as adviser on catalogue and indexing of library belonging to a senior Palaga family. Travels frequently around islands contacting teachers and others with book connections.

"Padrack, Lucy, aged forty-one, wife of above subject. Ex-teacher, now

assists husband in his work. Has written and published two books on legends of the islands, with special emphasis on erotic practices. Unusually tolerant marriage relationship, as she indulges herself with younger men. Husband apparently knows of this and refers to them as 'Lucy's little attacks' or 'Lucy has another cold — rather feverish this time'. No police record, but in her student years was prominent in various leftist groups. Arrested four times for obstructing police, refusing to disperse, uttering threats and distributing pamphlets calculated to incite revolt."

Well, all right — so you read and digest; so when you see Simon and Lucy Padrack coming up the gangway, what does this fact really tell you? You look at them and pre-judge them according to the alleged facts you've digested. They stick in your throat.

Simon Padrack looks as the report says, but his outward appearance did not convey the more important, essential Padrack. The way he strides up with an air of authority, the coldness of his eyes — pale grey pebbles behind polished lenses. The clipped, incisive tone of voice. These belie the pre-judged character. You say at once: "Watch it, my girl — just watch it. This man knows exactly what he's doing, where he's going and why — and it ain't for fun. Sex he might have, but fun? No, siree!" And you shiver slightly under the hot Palaga sun.

Lucy comes ahead of him, small, thin, with nobbly breasts. "Maybe falsies, but I don't think so," April thought. "Thin legs, large thighs, slim flanks. Large blue eyes in a thin, bronzed face, a sensuous mouth, small, thin nose — not beaky. The mouth and nose give her away. Tangle with that, man, and come the night you have yourself a wild cat!" Nothing about her to make immediate physical impact. You have to look hard — or with knowledge and training — to really see these things, because she doesn't project herself.

Her clothes are expensively ordinary, even unflattering. Mousey hair, uncut, plaited, wound around her head, straggling over forehead and temples. Very little make-up. First appearance — middle-aged, sterile, withdrawn. Blue veins patterning brown hands below skinny wrists. Yet when she speaks with that voice, she becomes alive. The report didn't mention that. The voice projects right enough — deep, warm, vibrant, yes, sir, all the clichés. Goddam, it even pulses, husky, smooth-cream!

In her hand is a parasol. She holds it like a drawn sword as she marches up to a seaman, stooping, coiling in rope. Lucy flicks the parasol handle. A blade, stiletto steel, pings out from the ferrule. She

rams it into the seaman's backside.

He bellows, leaps, whirls, lands facing her.

"You stood me up, you bum!" says Lucy in that lovely vibrant voice. "Do it again and I'll fix this in your guts — got it?"

The seaman gulps. "I get it, Lucy, but…"

"No buts — understand?" She clicks the blade back in the ferrule and marches off to join the group at the head of the gangway..

Simon Padrack ignored the incident. So did Maleski. Captain Sidano covered up with a "Ladies — Mr. Padrack, sir, be my guests. A cool drink, yes? Maleski, tell the men to see to the luggage. When Mr. Cheval arrives we will cast off."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Maleski quietly.

In the small, coolly attractive bar, April thought savagely:

"I wasn't prepared for these kind of people. It changes the whole approach. Damn the report!"

In the ship's liquor store, Mark Slate waited for contact with Sama Paru or Count Kazan. He didn't know which would be where, for Mr. Waverly had said: "They'll be in contact when the *Island Traveller* is ready to sail, so stand by as soon as you can."

"Come on, come on!" Mark muttered impatiently into the tiny instrument. He surveyed himself in the mildewed mirror hanging below the girlie calendar and noted the considerable improvement in his appearance. Then the voice came through. "Sama Paru to Mark Slate. Sama Paru in DX5."

"Dx5?" Mark whispered close to his ring mike. "That's a ruddy sub!"

"Midget," said Paru. "Two man. Cosy but cramped. We are parked outside the harbour. Submerged, of course."

"I'll be damned!" Mark had never reckoned on a submarine as a shadow contact. It made sense though. "We?" he said. "Who's we?"

"Randy Kovac is with me. He's done a special map job, so Mr. Waverly sent him out to gain field experience and check his theories."

"This is no novice race," said Mark. "No offence to Randy, but this thing bristles with professionals. Where's Kazan?"

"Luxury launch. Fast, powerful. Camouflaged gunboat. He should be clearing Palaga Bay soon."

"Soon? He should be at the rendezvous now."

"Lars Carlson made contact. He has to get off the island. Kazan is picking him up in a cove around the headland from your harbour."

"Ah, yes! Good. THRUSH identified him. I must go now, Sama."

"April is with you?"

"Sure. Over and out." Mark went into the bar, carrying bottles.

Sidano said: "About time. See that our passengers have the drinks they require. I am going to take the ship out."

Another passenger had joined them. April was discussing heat rash with Lucy. Simon Padrack was talking with the newcomer. Mark took their orders and cudgelled his memory as he mixed the drinks, but couldn't recall the name of Andre Cheval in the Palaga report. He managed an eyebrow-wiggling exchange with April across Lucy Padrack's bobbing hair — a manner of communication which, when linked with apparently idle eye movement, they had practised to fair success. She didn't know of Cheval either.

The purser came into the bar. At least he was called the purser and wore an officer's white jacket. Short, wiry, brown-eyed, tropic-wizened, with a quill of hair sticking up from an otherwise bald head, everyone called him Chas and most people assumed his name was Charles.

Years of service in these island traders had not dulled his cockney humour nor twangy voice. Every port in the islands and around the coast of Africa knew Chas. He had some shore connections, but where or with whom, nobody knew. Chas joined a ship, stayed with it, and when he left, the ship either sank, cracked up on a reef or in some other way ended its life. This reputation was so assured that when Chas declared he wasn't taking on for the next trip, all the regular seamen quit with him.

Not really a purser, but he held all the keys and the captain's trust. Not a ship's writer, but he did all the necessary paperwork. Not a

cook, but he prepared many a first-class meal. Not even a steward — or, unofficially, a chief steward, but he made life smoothly pleasant for all passengers. He wasn't the ship's chandler, but all suppliers in ports accepted his orders for goods and the captain always okayed the purchases. In the days of the old island traders, many ships had their Chas, but his was now a dying breed. The unions saw to that even if competition from air freight, hovercraft, helicopter and fast "pirate" cargo launches didn't drive the traders off the routes.

Chas greeted the passengers with cheerful respect. He had a "Well, now, ain't it nice to see you with us again," to the Padracks. To Cheval he said: "Nice quiet cabin for you, sir." "Nice" was a favourite adjective with Chas. It didn't always mean nice in the sense of pleasant. His way of describing a crew fight which barely stopped short of murder was "a nice howdedo".

"Thank you," said Cheval. "I will much appreciate to be quiet."

"You be as quiet as you like, sir. Rest and sea air and a nice modicum of sun — just what the doctor ordered, as y'might say. We'll be shoving off any minute now, so if you'd like to go to your cabin, it's all ready for you. Number five—on the starboard side."

Cheval finished his drink. "I think I will. Pardon me." He bowed to the others and left the bar.

Chas twinkled brown eyes at April. "Honoured to have you aboard, miss."

"Thank you."

"Seeing the islands, are we? Having a nice bit of getting away-from-it-all, like? Can't beat it, y'know. Luxury palls, so they say. Does you good to see how the other half lives. We ain't exactly the flagship of the line, but we aim to please."

"I'm sure you do," said April.

"S'right. Nothing fancy. There'll be more coming aboard at our first call. Have a nice ol' party, we will. Cabin number eight, miss. Anything you need, just ring the bell. If it don't work—and most times it don't — just holler Chas."

"You don't have a stewardess?"

Chas rubbed his chin. "Well, we do and we don't. We have one, but

she's not what you call reliable. She forgot to come back at Providencia on our last call, so you'll have to put up with me. Not to worry though, miss. Very safe, I am — ain't that so, Mrs. P.?"

Lucy Padrack laughed. "The safest man I know."

"Ur," said Chas. "It may not be exciting, but it's comforting, ain't it? Your cabin's ready, miss. Luggage stowed."

"I'll go and unpack." April sensed the request in Chas's voice, and caught a signal from Mark.

Simon Padrack said coldly: "Chas — why the hell don't you tell people the bar has to be closed as soon as the engines start?"

"Never talk against no one," said Chas. "Not me, sir. It ain't for the likes of me to say these perishin' Palagas are a bunch of blackmailing baskets, is it now?"

Lucy Padrack patted his cheek. "I wonder if you really are safe, Chas?"

"Not with you, me old darling." Chas grinned. "I'll bring the usual soon as his nibs has been."

The Padracks left. Chas moved behind the bar, selected six bottles of assorted spirits and liqueurs and placed them in a line on the counter.

Mark said: "What's that for?"

Chas winked and tapped his nose with a forefinger. A second later the engines started and an elegantly dressed Palaganian policeman entered the bar.

Chas at once let out a wail.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! I've done it again! I dunno what the captain will say." He turned and glared at Mark.

"You blasted fool, you — I told you to close the bar." He turned back to the policeman. "He's new. Didn't understand."

"Ah!" said the policeman. "A pity, but you know the rules."

"Yes, sir. All liquor standing on an open bar is confiscated." Chas sighed heavily. "Ah well, rules are rules. I'll help you carry them."

The policeman looked along the labels.

"Not Kirsch again?"

"Kirsch? It should be Vodka." Chas whipped another bottle in the line.

The policeman nodded, strolled out, followed by the laden Chas. Ten minutes later Chas returned.

"Why be so complicated?" said Mark.

"That's the Palaga way. If people were in the bar at the time the engines start, he'd have to fine them hard cash. If the bar is closed, he gets no perks. He has to pay in the cash, but not confiscated items. He flogs those himself. Nice people, them Palaganians."

Mark grinned. "What would happen if you didn't play?"

"You're kidding, of course? In Palaga, you play, mate, else you don't never come here again." Chas leaned on the bar top. "And talking of playing — it ain't nice, y'know, not nice at all."

"What isn't?"

"You using two-way talkie-walkie things in my liquor store."

They stared steadily at each other for a long time.

Then Mark sighed gently. "How much?"

"Ah!" Chas beamed. "That's nice of you to offer. We'll work out something. I'll let you know. Just you and me, eh? Nice and cosy. Not to worry. Keeper of a thousand secrets, they call me around the islands."

CHAPTER THREE: CORACLE-ORACLE

MARK silently cussed the cheerful Chas. The liquor store was an ideal place to make contact. Now, he had to find an excuse to shin up the rigging during his spell as deck hand. The *Island Traveller* needed a lot of attention as she creaked her way around the islands, so no cushy steward's job took priority over crew work. Fortunately, the block and tackle had to be re-rigged and some ropes spliced and fitted, so Mark had ample time on his own, high above the deck. Time enough to sight Kazan and the launch.

Kazan did a sweep around *Island Traveller*. Mark nearly fell off the mast with laughter when he saw Lars Carlson wearing a dark wig, a shortie beach robe and large sun glasses. Some material stuffed down his chest gave Lars a feminine appearance from a distance. Such launches were a common sight in these waters, but all had at least one female lounging on deck. Palaga patrol boats were suspicious if all males were aboard a strange launch, deeming smuggling as their own special preserve.

Count Kazan enjoyed himself in Palaga. He had the name, the air, and the reputation — and a wad of U.N.C.L.E. money. A top-echelon contact man in Europe, he moved in lush society but worked closely with Sama Paru. This was the first time they'd been sent far away from their own locations. Both were eager to do well, though Kazan sounded peevish.

"I study the file. In New York, in Paris, in Monte Carlo, I read and read. And what do I know? Damn damn-all! I have the grand time in Palaga, but not work time. Only to establish I am me and I have the money and the powerful boat. It is not enough for a man of action."

"Calm down," said Mark. "That place is thick with THRUSH and the Palagas know your every move. You did what you were instructed to do. Keep doing that — else you'll get us all killed."

"Am I a fool? Can I not have the little beef? What is at Taradata? Or is it another island?"

"If we knew, then we wouldn't be where we are," said Mark. "It's big — we know that. The threads lead from all over the world — first to Palaga, then to the islands. We have to find what it is, and our linking threads are very slender. If we're discovered before we can connect them, we shall all be very dead."

"Okay, so I play the playboy some more. But, *mon ami*, I am so tired of it. You have all the fun."

"Quit beefing and listen. I've a sharp boyo down below. A chap they call Chas — here's his description." Mark gave this, then added:. "Contact our man on the mainland first, then send it to H.Q. I want all the background you can get on him. Something I can blackmail him with, if possible. He could be a big danger."

"I come and throw him to the sharks."

"Aw, grow up, Kazan! Do as I say. Contact Paru in the Dx5 and get

him working on it too. He also has a contact on the mainland. If you can't reach me, try April Dancer. She'll find a way to pass it on."

It took two days, but they got it. Chas had been in the file, after all — under the name of Clarence Harold Arthur Salisbury, a combination which, of course, made a natural Chas. The researchers had cleared him and lined him up in the dossier along with ships' engineers, harbour masters, customs officials — all who linked with *Island Traveller* in the normal course of their work yet were free of any known contact with THRUSH.

Mr. Waverly sent a mild blistering, remarking that agents were supposed to absorb all details. Not just those that interested them, and when could he expect some information — perlease?

As April Dancer conveyed, on one of the few brief conversations they could manage: "This dam scow wallows along like a pregnant elephant — and so do the passengers. We come alive for five hours at Corn Island, pick up three more passengers and a hold full of pigs. You figure they are the THRUSH secret weapon?"

Mark yawned. "Passengers or pigs? For Pete's sake don't you start beefing too! How are you making out with Cheval and the Padracks?"

"Oh, great, just great! None of them leave their cabins long enough for me to even open the door. And if they do, then that blackmailing little Chas comes snooping around. It seems Cheval is recovering from a heart attack. The Padracks are getting off at Taradata. They are the V.I.P.s and regular passengers, yet they eat at Maleski's table while Cheval and I join the captain." She glared at Mark. "And what are you doing, besides making like a tame chimp up that mast?"

"This and that," he said airily. "When my work allows. You think my job is fun? You try it, sweetheart — just try it! Sixteen hours a day of assorted hard labour while you gorge and booze and lay around like pickled man-bait."

"You look very fit on it."

"I'd look, and feel, a sight fitter off it."

"Yes — I'm sorry. It was a snide crack for me to make. And your living quarters are terrible. I think you're wonderful to do the job, and to stick it."

"Flattery will get you as far as you like." Mark grinned. "As if you

didn't know it! Frustrated, that's us."

"And isolated. I haven't seen Kazan's boat for two days."

"They were called to rendezvous with a naval craft once we were clear of the Palaga patrols. And the midget sub too. It needs fuel and servicing rather frequently."

"That could be a liability."

"On a long sea haul — yes. But if we find anything, it will be on one of the islands — then the sub will be a powerful asset for off-shore work. There's something you can do, April. Develop an interest in the *Island Traveller*. Ask to be shown over it."

"Will do. Any particular objective?"

"Look for unusual bulkheads, or sea hatches, or hull openings, such as extra luggage chutes or cargo hatches. This tub isn't quite as creaky as it appears. The engines are the latest diesels. The captain's cabin has new electronic equipment. They haven't bothered to chip rust or furbish paint and renew ancillary equipment, but someone has spent a helluva lot of money on this crate — and where it'll do the most good."

"But, surely, Mark, you can find those things more easily?"

"Don't be naïve, darling. I'm just another ex-convict scum of a crewman. Maleski and his henchmen keep us hard at work and make sure we don't wander around. As steward I'm more free to enter the passenger deck, but that's about all. I was caught in the engine room and given a mild beat-up to teach me a lesson."

"Oh, Mark! You didn't tell me!"

"I didn't need to — until now. This boat is run like a prison as far as the deckhands are concerned. The few real seamen don't mix with us. Remember my dive from the mast? I swam around before climbing up the anchor chain. There are definitely a couple of hatches cut each side of the stern. Cleverly done, and the hull plates matched up to the openings so you wouldn't notice them from a distance. There's another amidships, about twenty feet aft of the real cargo hatch."

"Sort of secret loading and unloading points? Would they be for guns?"

Mark shrugged. "Could be. But not very heavy guns, because no crane

or derrick could hoist a load to reach those parts of the hull. There might be some form of lifting tackle inside the openings, but it would take up space."

"Drugs, then? Packages floated out on a land-line, then secured from the openings by something like a fishing rod?"

"I'd guess drugs more than guns, but there aren't any reports of major supplies of drugs coming from this area. The researchers surely would have got on to any major drug activity."

"You were signed on as a deckhand after being recruited from a mainland prison — so was Lars. There must be strong reasons why they need such an unsavoury crew. Didn't you get any hint of what you were expected to do — apart from rough work?"

"Oh yes, but only in vague terms. We're all promised a thousand-dollar bonus when we're paid off — in consideration for special services. All the men understand this to mean a sort of general bodyguard or strong-arm activity as and when required by captain or officers, an obedience to orders and a bad memory. The usual terms of thuggery. Killings, or individual beatings-up or other specialities, would rank for separate payment to the men who carried them out."

April smiled. "You're not in exactly high-class company, lover-boy, are you? Isn't a thousand dollars rather large for the grade?"

"Not really. The cost of living affects everyone these days. The important fact is that THRUSH money is paying us and Maleski is a THRUSH contact. The strong-arm section of the crew don't know or care who is behind their pay. The real seamen aren't affected. I've tried to get close to one or two of them, but no dice. Some are Palaga men — not actual Palagas but born there — the others are native-born islanders who've graduated from fishing boats. Good workers, quiet and proud. They have a natural courtesy — most of the islanders have — but they clam up tighter than an oyster to the sort of guy they think I am."

"You are one of the thugs to them," said April thoughtfully. "Maybe I could chat them up a bit? Find out what they think about having a strong-arm squad aboard?"

"You could try, but don't push it," said Mark. "Only the captain and his officers are supposed to talk with the passengers. There's almost more discipline aboard this tub than in many a naval ship."

April switched subjects. "You were aboard when the ship took on cargo. Anything special about it? What sort of stuff is in the closed holds?"

"Straight from the mainland warehouse stuff — all custom-checked. Bales of cloth, cases of canned goods, general shop merchandise — coffee, tea, rice, cigarettes. The islanders use their own cigars. All that was double-checked by our own contact men too. There isn't a thing on board that means anything more than what it is." He grinned. "Except us — and maybe one or two passengers!"

"What did the *Island Traveller* take on at Palaga?"

"Mainly liquor. They have a sweet racket in confiscating bottles from ships' bars, then flogging them back as exports, but they also do a legit trade in their own wines, brandy and rum. I was surprised the Palaganians have developed a boat-repairing industry, but I don't see any significance in that. It was probably one of the older crafts of the island before the Palagas became currency-conscious."

"What sort of boats?"

"Oh, tiny things. Like coracles."

"Like what?"

"Coracles — as in oracles. An English name, I believe. Or is it Irish? I dunno. Each island would have its own name for them. They weave wicker or reed strips into a tiny boat shape, then fix a skin on the inside. Use them for one-man fishing, training children to be boat-wise, and going out to tend nets or trap lines. Better than canoes. These don't capsize easily. There's stacks of them under plastic deck sheets in the stern and for'ard."

"Going where?"

"Taradata."

"Why Taradata?"

"Why not? Guess the islanders use a lot of them."

"Then why don't they repair their own?"

"Now listen, sweetie, they're just little old mini-boats — cockleshells. Around these parts they line the inside instead of the outside — using

some sort of leaf stuff that doesn't grow in Palaga. For Pete's sake — we've got enough dead trails without dragging in a perfectly innocent local craft! Can you imagine THRUSH trying to invade the world in a million coracles? A couple of bursts of multi-rocket fire and there'd be none left."

"Perhaps you're right." April smiled. "We'll just have to dig deeper, that's all. This project has cost a bomb already, and Kazan and Paru are still around someplace eating their expensive heads off." She glanced at her watch. "Give me three minutes to get clear." She winked. "Be good, lover-boy, and I'll let you escort me around one of the exotic isles!"

Mark made a rude noise. He gave her five minutes to get well clear via a small hatchway beyond the galley into the passengers' section. He then reported to the mate, who believed Mark was doing work for Chas. As Chas believed him to be under the mate's orders, Mark was able to disappear for a short time without either knowing it.

"I don't have to go up that blasted rigging again, do I, sir?" he growled.

The mate hadn't thought about it, but immediately he knew one of these scum didn't want to do a particular job he delighted in making sure they did it.

"Get up that mast when you're told!" he bellowed. "Clear the starboard lines, then grease all the pulleys"

"Aye, aye, sir." Mark shinned up the mast and got himself well balanced against the fore and aft pitch — no easy feat, because at mast height the swing was nigh on seven yards when the *Island Traveller* was bucking a swell. This was one of the most uncomfortable, even dangerous, places Mark had ever used to make contact with H.Q., but it was also one of the finest for reception.

"Ah! Mr. Slate!" Mr. Waverly boomed. "I trust you are well and truly nailed to the mast? A custom of the old pirates, I believe."

"Ha-ha!" said Mark dutifully. "And a bottle of rum, or somesuch. Do you have information for me, sir?"

"My own question precisely, Mr. Slate. May I remind you of the vast amount of time and considerable expenditure of money which so far has been put into this affair? We have in the past spent a great deal less and received far more. A soupcon of interest would not come amiss."

"We know there is a strong organization at work in the area. We are close to THRUSH contacts. We can only pursue our present course in the hope of uncovering the THRUSH project."

"But you are not, at this stage, any closer to a clarification?" Mr. Waverly insisted.

"No, sir."

"What is your next port of call?"

"Providencia, then Taradata."

"Let us hope Providencia will be providential for you, Mr. Slate — hum-hum!" said Mr. Waverly with joyous pomposity.

Mark took it manfully. In silence.

Then, gently: "You have a report for me, sir?"

"Indeed we have. A most revealing one. I am sure you will find it helpful. Standby and I will put you on to emergency feed-back."

E.F.B. made it crystal clear. Mark thought ruefully that if the whole file had been fed through the E.F.B. computer, they might well have discovered more field leads faster and easier. And the great advantage of E.F.B. was that by merely speaking the word "repeat", it spun itself back and gave you the gen all over again. You didn't have to apologize for not getting it the first time, nor miss a vital point because you didn't want to appear dumb, daft or dilatory.

He repeated it a number of times while working on the ropes and laughed gaily at certain passages. The report was collated from many sources. It represented quite a few man hours of work, although some of these had been used by researchers during the normal field compilation of the dossier.

At last he shinned down the mast and went to the fo'c's'le for his daily dish of fish skilly, very nourishing and utterly obnoxious in smell and taste. It had taken him four days to keep it down more than half an hour. His stomach's present acceptance of it was a triumph of mind over matter — aided by a pint of coarse wine so rough and sour that no grease could resist it. As a mouthwash it was excellent. Sealed in a spray can, TV projected, and sold for around fifteen dollars, it would have gone like a bomb.

The trick was to suck a short length of Barbados sugarcane while taking in the wine from the other side of the mouth. Convicts from mainland prisons were accustomed to this fare. To refuse it, to be unable to consume it, or not to know the correct eating and drinking "drill", would have been a dead give-away. U.N.C.L.E. agents have a varied education. They learn that most big factors take care of themselves, it is the tiny ones which attract a bullet in the back or a knife in the ribs.

Mark had to wait until that quiet hour after cocktails and before brandy when the bar trade was nil before he closed the bar and gave Chas the sign that talk was needed. They went to the liquor store, where Chas locked them in.

"Clarence Harold Arthur Salisbury — I salute you!" Mark sat on a keg, feathering cigar smoke.

The brown eyes puckered, surveyed him shrewdly, quizzically.

"Been digging around?" said Chas cheerfully. "Using that little talkie-walkie of yours? Won't do you no good, mate. It ain't nice, either. I'm me — see? One word from me and over the side you go — shark-bait. Shame — nice young fella like you—see what I mean?"

"My friends wouldn't like that, They'd do talkie-walkie themselves."

Chas nodded. "I bet they would. If it wasn't all nice and tidy. Witnesses, terrible tragedy, all writ up in the log, captain, mate, bosun, me — nice honest fellas. You honest?"

Mark nodded. "I'm honest."

"You ain't no ex-con, neither."

"That's where they hired me."

"Nah!" Chas shook his head, making his quiff bob like a petunia. "That's where you let 'em hire you." He drummed fingers on his chest. "A thousand secrets — remember? Y'know something? I was on the islands when the Japs came." He pulled open his shirt to show livid weals of old wounds criss-crossing his chest. He spun around, baring shoulders and scars of horrible lacerations. "Secrets, they wanted. Nice fellas. Nice habits they had. Swords, whips, and fire-heated bamboo. Before you came up, sonny. Long time ago. Keeper of a thousand secrets — that's me." He buttoned his shirt. "I don't scare," he said raspingly. "Get that. I don't scare. But I trade. You want to trade?"

Mark shrugged. "In what?"

"Your safety. I don't want to know why. Nor who. You tell me and it's secret. I don't care. I ain't no ally. We trade and I ain't no enemy."

"I might convince you it was important. That I was important."

"Nah! Nothing is, see? It's all a giggle. You spy, I spy, we spy the nice spy." His voice changed to a deep timbre. "Man, this is bigger than both of us!" He spat between Mark's feet. "Something like that, you are. That set I spied you using — it ain't on sale. So maybe you're government. Which? I don't care."

"They might," said Mark grimly. "See what I mean?"

Chas began to laugh. He had white, expensively tailored dentures. The laughter, the crinkled eyes, the flashing teeth, the dancing quiff gave him a buccaneering air. Real laughter. His eyes watered with it. At last he drew deep breaths and stopped laughing.

"Ten thousand dollars. In used notes. There's a bank in Providencia. I ain't greedy. I'll fix shore leave for you. If your little talkie-walkie ain't any use to contact your cashier, I'll fix it for you to use a private radio. I can even hold up sailing for a day."

Mark grinned. "Do I hear the voice of experience? It's all happened before, hasn't it, Chas?"

"Aye, sonny — and will again."

"And you're not even curious why, or who, or what?"

"Not one little tittle."

"Yet you could cause me to die without knowing or caring?"

"S'right, mate."

"Did they cut out your heart with those swords?"

Chas puckered his lips in a soundless whistle, then grinned. "Shall we dance? Before you break me perishin' heart! Grow up, sonny! I never yet saw a general or an admiral cry over one poor devil cut to pieces. Expendable, they was - see? That's what they taught me. We're all expendable. Only some are more expendable than others — such as you right now."

"Police?" said Mark. "Could be tricky for you."

"Not around here. High seas, mate — or else island waters and local justice. I know it's hard, very hard, but you just got to face it, sonny. You ain't important at all, except to me." Chas lit a cigarette, puckered eyes through the smoke. "Ten thousand — or you'll never get off the island except in a canvas sheet. Like they used to tell me in my man's army — you might break your mother's heart but you won't break mine."

Mark's hand moved casually. A small tube appeared in his hand. A faint click ejected a tiny barrel.

"Something else you can't buy in shops, Chas. It can fire up to six capsules. Like little razor darts, they are. One will be enough. Doesn't matter what part of your flesh it hits." He spat between Chas's feet. "*Kaput! Finis!* Heart failure."

Chas didn't move. He let the cigarette hang from his lower lip, the rising smoke veiling his eyes.

"Nice firm you work for. Very clever these days, ain't they? You didn't hear me the first time, sonny. I don't scare. Call yourself Slater, don't you? Reckon it's not your name, but you're on the ship's books as Slater, and we have a little camera that took a pretty picture of you — and all the others — soon as you came aboard."

Mark shrugged. "So does that save your life?"

"It won't save yours, mate. This liquor store is bugged. So's every cabin. All we're saying right now is spinning around on a tape. Only one other person knows where that machine is hidden. Anything happens to me — he'll do the listening. Slater killed me. Get him." Chas smiled.

Mark shrugged again. "*C'est la guerre!*" He carefully restored the dart gun to safety position, replaced it in his pocket. "That's how you heard me before."

"C'est la flippin' common sense too," said Chas. "Bright boy, that's you. Ten thousand dollars."

"So you married a Palaga. How is Mrs. Salisbury?" said Mark softly.

"She ain't a widow yet."

"And how is Mrs. de Witt — Mrs. Charles de Witt? And Mrs. Charles Gordon? And Mrs. Charles Sale? Charles equals Chas equals C.H.A. Salisbury, Esquire, equals bigamist *extraordinaire*, and the greatest of these is Mrs. Salisbury of Palaga. I don't know whether she was the second or the fourth — but we do know she wasn't the first — so she isn't. If you see what I mean?"

Chas inhaled deeply, then held his cigarette in steady fingers as he let the smoke gently trickle out.

"S'funny, y'know," he said quietly. "I never reckoned on it coming from a stranger."

"You disappoint me, Chas. No bluff. No counter threats?"

"Very smart — your lot. Must have been working on me a long time. Flattering, ain't it? Little me!"

"Routine," said Mark. "We missed you the first time. Surface research was all we read. But all research is done at three levels. Two are not shown to people like me unless you are a principal. Suddenly, you become a principal. We almost know what baby food you ate. There won't be any ten thousand dollars. And we have photographs and tape equipment too."

"You forgot something, sonny. My religion allows me all the wives I can keep. The law around these parts is kind of tolerant of my religion. So that'll still be ten thousand dollars."

"Only two things wrong with that, has. You married the Palaga one under Palaga laws. Maybe you'd even get out of that. But you forgot to tell any of them about the others. We wouldn't bother the law with it. Wouldn't need to. We are already arranging a pleasant all-expenses-paid trip to Palaga for Mrs. de Witt, Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Sale. We'll deliver them all to Mrs. Salisbury and let them sort it out. Or should I say — let them sort you out?"

Chas ground the butt of 'his cigarette with his heel.

"Diabolical," he said, still smiling. "Dia-bloomin-bolical! That's you, mate! It'd be a nice old howdedo, wouldn't it?"

"I can imagine. Scared now, Chas?"

"Nah! Not scared. A bit annoyed, like." He shrugged. "Okay — you win. No ten thousand dollars."

"And no shark bait?"

"You're safe, sonny. From me, anyway. You don't have very nice friends."

"They could be real nice to you — the keeper of a thousand secrets. You wouldn't even miss a couple."

"Such as?"

"This ship is virtually under charter, isn't it?"

"Could be."

"Registered in Palaga by a Palaga company — making routine calls around the islands, carrying normal cargo and a few passengers. Why bother to charter? Why take on a strong-arm crew?"

"Ask 'em yourself."

"Who?"

"The Padracks. It'll be the last question you ask. And I'll keep this tape just to prove I warned you."

Mark frowned. "This puts me at risk again, Chas."

"Well, you shouldn't be so damned nosey, should you? But don't worry, sonny. I'll give you a trade. You're trying to uncover something, aren't you? Something big. Same as the Swede, only they got on to him. You saved him. I reckon the girl's in with you too, One of them comical outfits — Auntie or Uncle, or somesuch, ain't you? No skin off my nose. I'm me. I've had enough of organizations — had a bellyful of 'em — so I just don't want to know. Money is all I want. You can have your ruddy glory." He rubbed the weals on his chest. "I've had mine. So I'll trade." He took out a bottle from the wine rack, reached his hand inside and clicked off a switch. He, turned to Mark and grinned. "Off the record. Watch the boats of Taradata." He raised his hand as Mark was about to speak. "That's all, sonny." He held out his hand. "You trade?"

Mark gripped it. "I trade. We'll hold over arrangements to transport the ladies."

"Right. I'll leave you long enough to use your little talkie-walkie. Make it quick. You're not bugged."

Mark grinned. "Why bug the liquor store?"

"Because locks can be forced, and keys pinched — but no one can be so silent they beat the bug. I switch it through an amplifier at night. Our seamen are bonza fellas, but if they get drink in 'em they go beserk."

"You said all the cabins were bugged too."

Chas nodded. "By the Padracks. I should worry. At the price they're paying they can bug the ruddy sharks as well, for all I care."

"Sounds like you cut a commission on the deal."

Chas snorted disgustedly. "Commission? A nice pack of researchers your lot are! Cor stone the crows, don't you know I own the flamin' ship?" He unlocked the door and went out, muttering.

CHAPTER FOUR: THY NAME IS WOMAN

A TRIFLE peeved, that's me, April Dancer thought, as she lazed in glamorous indolence on the sun deck. Peeved because — aha! Don't let Mark or any U.N.C.L.E. colleagues read your thoughts, my lass. Peeved, you are, because no one seems aware of you. Near-nude or Paris-gowned, mod-geared or man-bait alluring, you make no dent — in anyone on this boat.

Palaga went to your head. This is work. Okay, so that was work too. All the links were made there, the character built, the identity registered — little gay girl with a yen to express herself. No, thank you, not on a luxury cruiser — one gets so tired of luxury this and luxury that.

That quaint boat with its rust and blistered paint, and assorted cargo of human needs — that's what I need to bring me close to real people. The real life of the islands. I'm going to put it all in a book — a real book of real people. It's not because my psychiatrist advised it to help release myself. I feel I've always had this talent, you see? And now I've got to fulfil myself. It'll be a best-seller, of course. Well, of course, I mean, who else in my position has ever got so close to life? People are tired of travelogues written by professional hacks. Dear Orlando, it's sweet of you to encourage me so much.

The big build-up to impress the Padracks. "Why, aren't you Miss

Dangerveldt, the heiress who is going to write about our islands? Well, books are our business — you must allow us to help you all we can." They knew. Of course they knew. The local field workers had seen to that. Yet, not a nibble! Not one teeny reaction.

So she'd had to force it a bit. "Oh, Mr. Padrack, I hear you are in the book business. Now isn't that a coincidence! Of course, I'm not telling everybody, but, seeing we have so much in common — I mean, you and your charming wife knowing all about books and the islands and all these lovely people. .

The cold-grey pebble eyes stared at her. She feigned embarrassment. "Well, what I'm trying to say is — I am writing a book about the islands."

Not one flicker of interest. What did the great bookman say?

He said: "Who isn't?" and walked away.

Well, she knew he was THRUSH. At least, THRUSH connected. But he didn't know she was U.N.C.L.E. But after all the groundwork... "Who isn't?" he said! And Lucy Padrack had smiled nastily before leaving the bar in search of her tomcat.

Peeved was the word. This was the most infuriating case — personal-wise — she had ever been on. She was peeved against Mark too. She even envied him his work. Basically, she wasn't a gay girl, never had been. What woman wouldn't revel in Palaga-style vacationing? Those lovely clothes, the lush line-up, Orlando and Co., the Climb Sublime — a two-tiered heaven set in an azure seascape. But, oh lordy, how idleness palls!

Now, on the *Island Traveller*, she was the mostest. Didn't even need a mirror to know it. Perhaps I have you-know-what and no best friend? Isolationists. The boat was full of ruddy isolationists. Or misogynists? Captain Sidano, quiet and gruffly courteous. He spoke Spanish. April tried him at that. He answered, but didn't comment on her linguistics.

Cheval also. Okay, so he'd been sick. Looked well enough now. And April was proud of her French. But: "Pardon, mam'selle," he'd said. "I prefer to speak English." Small talk — all the time small talk, and not much of that. Not enough to trap a casual word and link it with any known facts. And the sun shone, and the flying fish flew, and Mark Slate was up the mast again reporting his action. "And how is Miss Dancer?" "Oh, lush, sir, very lush and golden brown!" And bored and bitchy.

The new passengers made the bar more full. They drank with her, and smiled, and minded their own business. The island of Providencia lay smudged-olive to starboard as the *Island Traveller* came in wide to miss the currents. Taradata was three days ahead. But at last a link would be there to follow through.

Mark had relayed his session with Chas, who had assumed a new respect in her eyes. The first steward April had met who actually owned the boat in which he so ably served, although in a somewhat menial position. But a key position. Chas had contact with everyone.

Mark had checked out a few more H.Q. details about Chas. He was, in fact, a follower of Y-Shan-U — an obscure but powerful island religious sect — and his status was more or less the equivalent of a high priest. As such he was allowed up to six wives — his weakness being the Palaga "wife", as H.Q. had shrewdly assessed, because that was Chas's only business marriage. Under Palaga law, the names of directors of companies need not be made public. The Palaga "wife" was his co-director, her brother secretary. The money to sustain his other households came through this connection.

H.Q. felt that Chas was a red herring in this affair. He kept out of all rackets, yet collected from as many as he could. Such was the Palaga custom. He'd once been a Silver Greyhound — a British Government Foreign Office messenger — and a wartime V.C. He had even been an undercover man in the Far East and the Caribbean, and on special assignment around the Pacific ports. Then he had gone on to the island boats. Chucked everything. Clammed up. A keeper of a thousand secrets all right. But no part of THRUSH. No part of anything, except himself, and the Y Shan-U in which he fervently believed.

April managed to wangle her tour of the ship, but this too proved frustrating. Maleski, the brisk guide around the working parts, was a slick avoider of the very sections she had hoped to check. Later, having thus observed the lay out of the ship, she donned buttock-tight slacks and did a whistle-stop tour under her own steam. Amidships she found evidence of a new bulkhead. No rust, fresh paint, but a dingy shade which gave an appearance of old paint.

The whole structure had a strange feel. April purposely upset her purse so as to scrabble around on the floor of the section leading to a luggage hold. She had almost reached the conclusion that the bulkhead wasn't steel and had a clearance between it and the floor when, "Yee-ow!" she yelped, as Lucy Padrack's parasol blade

penetrated her rump.

"Oh, my dear — it's you!" said Lucy Padrack, as if she didn't know. "I thought it was one of those young girls from Corn Island. The crew's quarters are strictly taboo to them. It's only a little jab — it won't bleed much." Her eyes glittered. "Dropped your purse, did you? Or are you being rather naughty? Some of the crew are so attractively uncouth, aren't they? And they come this way to their quarters."

"You should know," said April savagely.

She wasn't quite sure how it happened.

Lucy Padrack suddenly let fly with a stream of invective, in a flaring jealousy by an older woman against a young and lovely one. The words were coarse and ugly, bitter in their biological descriptions, carried on a richly vibrant voice which added to the sheer horror of them. Spoken in the hysterical strains of a screaming virago, or the fishwife intonations of a slut, they would have been evil enough — but in that staggeringly beautiful voice these obscenities were doubly foul.

This was personal — woman to woman, a gushing release from a tortured mind, yet not uncontrolled. Lucy Padrack's eyes didn't glare. She didn't froth at the mouth, nor claw with trembling hands. The filth poured out of her with deliberate slashing venom.

For a few seconds April assessed the possibility that the Padracks had linked her as an agent and that this was a way of building up to an open attack — perhaps with the parasol stiletto. Then she knew it wasn't so.

No doubt Lucy Padrack had been nursing this ever since she saw April. Many women of Lucy's age felt that way about all young, attractive females. And made a hell of their menfolks' lives with their endless suspicions, real or imagined. The man didn't really matter — he was merely a focal point at which all the pent-up viciousness could be directed. Female youth, beauty, sex appeal, freshness and charm were the enemy.

But Lucy Padrack was different. Obviously unrestricted in personal affairs, she and Simon Padrack appeared to have worked out their own pattern of living. It looked as if both kept all emotion out of their relationship and, if the research files were correct, this system allowed them to be a successful business team. Not unusual, but always harder for the woman to be as objective as the man. And if her need for

sexual release is strong and requires such types as Lucy apparently favoured, then a bubbling cauldron can seethe beneath the lid of the marriage pot.

It could boil over more or less safely with the man of her choice, but Lucy could never escape the eternal female pressure caused by a younger, more attractive woman. Her husband had removed himself as a focal point, but if she lambasted him, he would swiftly dissolve the business partnership before it became too threatened. And there was no doubt in April's mind that Simon Padrack wouldn't hesitate to do that. Emotional blackmail would leave him cold.

All this background of human frailty was obvious to the trained mind of the U.N.C.L.E. agent. Such psychological and biological functions, and the patterns of behaviour which emanated from them, had been an important part of her education. She had majored in philosophy, and the U.N.C.L.E. advanced training courses on the role of women in espionage and counter-espionage gave clear knowledge of these matters based upon case files.

This intensive training also made her more aware of her own feminine intuitiveness and how it could be directed, controlled and applied at the correct times. But it was never really easy to use. A prodigious mental effort was needed constantly and objectively. Most women found it easier to go out of control deliberately. A man usually shied from emotional scenes that drained him but fed her, and so would capitulate. Block or remove this obliging and comparatively docile object of release and who the hell would listen to a woman's screaming vituperations? Another woman? Not blooming likely!

As April Dancer reached this moment of truth, she knew why Lucy Padrack had suddenly and apparently gone berserk. And in this moment realized that she too was bored, frustrated, and not a little peeved over lack of attention to her own feminine self — and with a whoop, almost of joy, she burst into glorious action.

"Why, you stupid bitch!" said April Dancer, when Lucy Padrack had paused for breath. "How dare you talk to me like that! How dare you stick your absurd little toy dagger into me! I'll have your guts for garters!"

She slammed a judo chop on Lucy's arm. The parasol fell. April kicked it away.

"Come on, sweetie," she said softly, weaving on her toes. "Come and

get it!"

Lucy came with hands crooked, nails clawing, slashing at April's face, which suddenly was no longer in range. April jolted Lucy's head with a backhand across the ear. Lucy's hand flashed out, grabbing hair. April went with the pull, using its momentum to butt Lucy square in the face, then dug fingers into the woman's muscle-taut arm. Lucy yelped with the double pain of her face and electric-like shock in her arm which forced her hand to spring open, releasing April's hair.

Lucy reeled back, eyes watering, mouth gasping obscenities. Her pointed shoe slashed up. April arched her body and spun sideways, but the point sliced across her stomach, catching the hip bone in a pain-searing welt. She grabbed the moving instep as the foot neared the end of its travel, then clamped her other hand on the calf, pivoted, twisted and flung upward. Lucy crashed in a somersault.

She came up like a cat from a launching pad, all paws slashing. In the confined space, April could not wholly evade the hurtling body, but she gripped the arms, pinioning the clawing hands away from her eyes and face. Lucy's feet beat like the tattoo of the paws of an hysterical monkey into April's thighs on their way floorwards. April swivelled away, releasing the arms, but had to get clear to avoid injury from those leather-heeled shoes. Lucy at once slammed in punches with surprisingly hard little fists.

April decided enough was enough and went to work — coolly, scientifically, with slashing hands, palm edges, palm flat, curved knuckles, and an occasional forearm smash. In a few minutes she had Lucy cowering, sobbing, gasping — visibly frightened and aware that this lightning exhibition of unarmed combat, female style, could just as easily be killing her instead of giving her the hiding of her life.

It was a bitter defeat, made worse by the final indignity. April took one of Lucy's arms, pulled, levered and expertly heaved. Lucy's body again somersaulted to the floor. She lay there, face down, for a few minutes before slowly easing up to hands and knees. April picked up the parasol and jabbed the blade into Lucy's high-raised rump. Lucy collapsed with a howl of pain.

April snapped off the dagger, put it in her purse, then leaned against the bulkhead, calmly using comb and compact.

Lucy groped to one side for support to assist her in rising. Her hand pressed on a lever which April had missed in her inspection of the

bulkhead. The whole section slid open, revealing a roller-loading channel leading to a white-painted sealed hatchway.

When she realized what had happened, Lucy quickly moved the lever back. As the section closed she climbed slowly to her feet. Her hands smoothed straggling hair back from her eyes, straightened her clothes.

"I've broken a couple of straps," she said. "Do you have a safety pin, dear?" She giggled. "Well — whatever came over us? It must be the heat."

They stared at each other for a long, cool minute before April passed her the safety pin.

"Yes," she said. "The heat."

Lucy Padrack smiled. "Sweet child! One day I shall kill you — very slowly."

April Dancer smiled back. "But of course, darling!" She closed her purse and walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE: DECOY AND LINK

APRIL didn't tell Mark about the cat-fight with Lucy Padrack, nor did she need to tell Mr. Waverly the details. She had found the bugging device in her cabin, disconnected it, extracted the guts, then replaced it. So, providing she used a low-pitched voice, she was able to contact H.Q. in comparative freedom.

April said: "Mr. Waverly, I may have boobed. I don't think I've done any harm. I certainly discovered some thing I previously had missed." She told him about the bulkhead. "But this occurred after I had acted as shown in Case File Eleven in our advanced training course, psychiatry section."

"Just a minute." Mr. Waverly's phenomenal memory needed a twitch. "Ah, yes! Well, this sort of thing is bound to happen sooner or later, Miss Dancer, especially where efforts to obtain the subject's confidence were not successful. There is a large amount of feline instinct built up which triggers off this type of outbreak. In the absence of logical links, you could not help but react instinctively. But, knowing this woman, her background and current connections, there is no doubt she will try to kill you. She is at present justifying

herself before the act. So be on your guard."

April was relieved. "I thought you'd bawl me out for allowing personal feelings to override my judgment."

"It discovered the secret hatch, did it not? It has released you from the need to maintain a friendly front with the Padracks. Which, incidentally, did not produce much information, did it? So what have you lost? It also sharpens your own reflexes because when you uncover more of what is undoubtedly an affair of considerable proportions, you will know exactly what to expect from Lucy Padrack, and act accordingly."

"Thank you, sir. That makes me feel better."

"I was aware of your frustrations, Miss Dancer. You cannot always be reporting melodramatic events. We already have been through many months of wearisome research. Mr. Slate and yourself have made handsome progress."

She frowned. "I don't see how."

"Little things, Miss Dancer, little things — like little babies — grow astonishingly fast. So innocent, yet swiftly so full of exciting promise. For example: the report about innocent little boats. Did you know that many thousands of these boats have been imported into this country? That a new sport of coracle crafting is enjoying boom success in certain areas, especially along the Pacific seaboard? That there are now clubs and a central organization? All very sporty and chummy. And there are even tiny outboard motors designed to be attached to these innocent, fun-making little craft."

"Gosh—I didn't know all that, sir!"

"Nor did we until your report aroused our interest. Now we discover that certain individuals, believed to have THRUSH connections, occupy key positions in the central organization and in most of the clubs. Our little baby has grown to a very nasty-sized thug. So proceed with your assignment, Miss Dancer. Eschew emotion, if you can, but allow that a portion of it makes us all tick."

She laughed softly. "Yes, sir, I will."

"I think you will find it easier to contact me after the next twenty-four hours. I shall be aboard a certain naval vessel somewhere in your locality. Liaison between Count Kazan, Sama Paru and Mark Slate,

yourself and myself will then be far better."

April tried not to show surprise. Mr. Waverly did not expect his top agents to be surprised, let alone reveal this emotion.

"I expected you might find that necessary," she answered quickly. "Is Randy Kovac promoted to field student?"

"Not exactly. He is with Sama Paru to obtain experience, but he also is there to prove to us and to himself that high-flown theories worked out on paper are not necessarily helpful to an agent in the field."

"In other words — you're going to make him convict himself out of his own mouth, or burn his own fingers, or break his own neck?"

"That will be quite enough clichés from you," said Mr. Waverly briskly. "It really is a lazy way of speaking. Do try to break the habit. Goodbye, Miss Dancer."

Count Kazan's luxury launch came, at bow-creaming, hull-slapping speed, from somewhere out of the heat-shimmering horizon to cross *Island Traveller*'s wake and enter Providencia harbour two hours before she tied up. Lars Carlson in a dark wig and saucer-sized sun glasses could be seen swabbing the deck and carrying out chores while remaining within earshot of the radio. His master, the lordly Kazan, looking more like a millionaire than any millionaire could afford to look, strolled in arrogant splendour along the quay.

Mark observed all, and cussed all, with steaming intensity. As the rest of the labour crew, apart from the seamen, also were sweating and cussing, no one asked him for his particular reasons. They had lost the land wind when *Island Traveller* moved to her berth in the harbour beneath the hills. The heat was a glaring whip flaying eyes, heads and bodies as they laboured to winch up cargo from the holds.

Mark saw April Dancer, like a cool, green, iced lollie, waiting by the gangway. He even cussed her gently, though admitting she couldn't help it if she looked good enough to eat. Or could she? That lime-green dress against the golden skin, dark hair shining, thighs and buttocks contoured by the thistle-light material. Goddam it, she didn't have to stand just there, did she? You bet she did! No woman is going to miss a chance like this. Mark swore savagely as he heard the comments from the men around him. Do women really know what is said at these moments? Or are they too full of their own mental reflection of themselves!

Mark spat. And a great narcissis to you too! April darling, dammit, go back in the shade. He snarled at a fellow crewman: "Watch it, you clumsy swine! Who is? You are. A stinking, fat, clumsy swine!" And the bosun stepped quickly between them. "Knock it off now — knock it off, you two!" he yelled. "Swing that derrick! Let's get this gear off and go bathe in a gallon of cold beer!" Yeah, yeah — tote that drum, lift that bale! Why the hell do I volunteer for this sort of drag?

He glanced up, to see Chas grinning at him. A super-sharp Chas, all pressed white ducks and curly panama, and flashing teeth.

"Git on with it," said Chas. "There's a ruddy great load to come aboard yet."

"— you too," said Mark.

"Tut-tut," said Chas. "If your muscles were as big as your words, you'd be a real man, sonny." He strolled past the heaving, sweating men and joined the group at the gang way.

April had moved back into the shade. The Padracks were some way off, talking with Maleski, who had just given orders to run out the cat-walk. Four seamen were fixing it. The group of young couples clustered together, chattering and giggling.

"Luscious," said Chas. "That's you, miss. Fair luscious."

"Why, thank you, Chas. You look quite delicious too."

"It's me nature, miss. White brings out the purity in me." He leaned close to her. "Been pig-sticking any good bottoms lately?"

"Chas! I'm surprised at you!"

"Yeah? Well, don't take no trip around the island, else you'll be surprised right enough. Stay where there's people." He moved back a pace, saying loudly: "The hotel ain't bad at all, miss. And you should see their hanging garden. Oh, hullo, sir — going ashore to stretch your legs?"

Andre Cheval had come on deck and was moving towards them.

"A little land beneath my feet, I think, is good. I am told the hills are very lovely." He looked at April. "Would you join me, Miss Dangerveldt? A short, pleasant trip into the cool green hills. I do not want to go alone, and the Padracks have business to tend."

"So kind of you," said April. "But a friend of mine has brought his boat all the way from Palaga just to meet me." She looked at Chas, but he'd moved farther away and started down the gangway. She smiled at Cheval. "Perhaps my friend could come too?"

He shrugged. "I am defeated, mam'selle. I am sure your friend would not invite me — in the circumstances." He smiled. "But do take a ride around the island. You will gain wonderful material for your book."

"But of course," said April gaily. "I wouldn't dream of missing it."

"Au'voir, then." Cheval tipped his hat, bowed and walked to the gangway.

Around a vivid clump of poinsettias, on sun chairs beneath a cluster of dwarf palm trees, April came upon Count Kazan and a gay-looking girl of about her own age, wearing a flame and orange dress. She looked cool, shining-eyed, and glamorous. They smiled at each other.

"April Dancer!"

"Colamina Sherez?"

"But naturally," said Kazan. "One of our most brilliant researchers in the precious flesh."

"You're lovely," said Colamina.

"So are you," said April.

"And I am gorgeous too," said Kazan.

"Not my type," said April.

"An arrogant man," said Colamina. "With the big head and the little mind."

Kazan sighed. "I wish I were back in Europe where I am, oh, so much appreciated. But here on this heathen island, what can you expect? We are in radio silence for twenty-four hours, but I rendezvous with Mr. Waverly forty miles north-west of Taradata, so I am courier. You have something?"

"No," said April, stretching in a chair. "Not yet, any way. Have you, Colamina?"

"There are many stores going aboard *Island Traveller* for Taradata.

They come here by charter boat. A Palaganian flag, but it is from Mexico, I think. Some are cases of a chemical."

Kazan eased a phial from his pocket. "Brave girl — clever girl."

Colamina shrugged gently. "So my fiancé is the warehouse manager."

"She is lying," said Kazan. "He is just a boy friend and he had nothing to do with it. She risked her neck. The warehouse here is staffed by Palaga guards. Lars gave me the details. But nothing except ordinary goods come here from Palaga. I think it is time we got her off here. This is too small a place for her to be safe after meeting us."

"I thought you were a little bold," said April.

"It would not be possible to be secret," said Colamina. "I can bluff about meeting a wealthy man visitor, and even Miss Dancer too, but trying to hide a meeting — no, not here."

"Kazan is right. I've just had a surprising link-up." April told them about Chas, then about Cheval's invitation.

"That Chas!" Colamina exclaimed. "He is a powerful man on the islands. He is religious, you know? A religion of no fear and great joy. A strange man. Very strong. You will think it silly to say — but everyone can trust him. I cannot explain, but it is so."

"Keeper of a thousand secrets?" asked April.

"Ah yes — that is one of his titles. And another silly thing to say — he will kill, yet never harm anyone."

"You have known him kill?" said Kazan.

Colamina shrugged again. "I know. It is enough. About your trip around the island — he may know from his mind, or he may know from knowledge. It is the same thing with Chas."

"We either take your word or we show we've no faith in you," said April. "But we don't have colleagues in whom we have no faith so, through you, we accept Chas's warning. That means Cheval must now be linked in."

"With the Padracks?" said Kazan. "Has he been here before, Colamina?"

"French, you say? Cheval?" She frowned. "No, not that I remember,

and certainly not with the Padracks." She smiled at them. "But I have a way we can prove this. The cars do not leave for an hour because of the heat. They are old and they boil over on the hills. If Kazan goes down to the Square and casually discovers Cheval, he could say he is looking for April, who has gone. Now, listen — I think this would work."

Agents are expendable. Researchers are not. In field work an agent has complete authority within his or her own terms of reference. But events sometimes widen such terms of reference, events which are set in train by the agent or his enemies. Close contact with H.Q. is maintained whenever possible, but no agent refuses to make a decision because he cannot immediately call up H.Q. and say: "Please, sir, can I do this or that?" He assesses both risk and reward.

Researchers live at risk. Their training is extremely specialized. They may be young and beautiful. Old and graceful. Fat and ugly. All share one common talent — a genius for probing into people's lives. The highest form of nosey parkers, experts in the art of the casual or throwaway question, with the receptive powers of a father confessor — wise, tolerant, sympathetic, the ready listener to tales of woe, the shrewd judge of what is a relevant link to be forged into their own chain of inquiry.

Sometimes they work in pairs or teams because some are more expert than others in checking official records after a whisper of gossip or fact is passed on to them. So at times they can be at risk. But usually they work so quietly, amassing those seemingly trivial dossiers of human peccadilloes, family secrets and skeletons in closets that no one ever suspects they are a part of a vast organization. An agent can be known, just as he may know agents on the other side, but a researcher must never be known as such.

April Dancer had served her term as a researcher. So had Count Kazan. Many contact men are researchers. Their official role comes between the true researcher and the top- assignment agent, but they use researchers for detailed background work. The qualities that make a good researcher do not necessarily make a good agent, but a top agent has to, and can, perform all tasks. Researchers who show great courage, initiative, coolness and good judgment, allied to physical stamina and power, are always encouraged and recognized as viable agent material.

Colamina Sherez was one of these. The plan she proposed lay well

outside her scope as a researcher, but on this small island her term of usefulness without danger to herself was in any case ending.

Count Kazan said: "It is your decision, Miss Dancer. I agree with Colamina's plan, but not with the person proposed."

"But it is myself, you silly man," said Colamina.

"That's what he means," said April. "Kazan is no different from a lot of our men. They still cannot reconcile an attractive woman with danger. They are steeped in the myths of chivalry. We have the same training, can perform the same tasks in our own way, are paid as much, if not more than some of them — because, after all, we don't have to support wives and children — and have many privileges of our sex. This is our freedom. But they still want to protect us... It is not a question of sex, age or beauty, Kazan. It is only one question — will this decoy plan expose another link to us? If so, then we do it. And having decided, we then use all our wits to minimize the danger to Colamina. Right?"

He shrugged resignedly. "Right."

"Then you will go to the Square and lay the ground bait. Colamina and I will be at the hotel. Buy one of those gay shopping baskets with a lid, fill it with canned goods — usual food stores — take it to your boat. Put the guns, the protective gear and the trap devices in the basket and come to the hotel. We could use Lars on this. With a radio silence in force, he could leave the boat, hire one of those motor scooters and go ahead into the hills. No one will snoop aboard at this time of day."

"Ah yes! That will make me feel much happier." Kazan beamed. "And we all could keep a radio link. I will see to it." He kissed Colamina gently. "You are still too lovely, *ma petite!*"

"Get going," said April curtly. "And forget your hormones. This is business."

The vegetation on Providencia was not exotic, as on many of these islands. The hills which looked so attractively olive- green from the sea were, in fact, planted with olive trees. Eucalyptus trees, prickly pear and fawn-coloured grasses were the only other vegetation. The more fertile areas were around the base of the hills between the beaches.

But the scene had grandeur and the panorama viewed from various vantage points a picture-postcard beauty. The breeze was cool and tangily scented. To tourists it made a refreshingly enjoyable trip after days on the island boat. Camera nuts could use all lenses for technical shots to brighten many a long winter evening back home — wide angle, telephoto, and "This is Marge looking for a lizard that got away".

The taxi drivers knew all the camera angles and the ways to obtain extra tips for "discovering" these. There weren't many taxis on the hills today. The young couples had hired scooters. Andre Cheval was way up there somewhere and Lars had him in view.

The girl in the lime-green dress, wearing a large-brimmed hat, sunglasses and carrying one of the island export baskets, had climbed into the taxi at the hotel — one of the newer taxis with a drophead roof — and pretended not to notice the gun bulge in the driver's coat. He himself didn't look closely at his passenger. He had orders he didn't like, but the pay was high and he couldn't refuse. He had been exported from Palaga a few years previously for the crime of over-production family-wise, now had five children and a sixth on the way. He didn't know all that happened around the island these days, but carrying out orders meant more money, providing you weren't curious.

He stopped the taxi on a small plateau, one of the camera vantage points.

"It is a lovely view, yes?"

"Uh-uh!" his passenger grunted. The difference between April and Colamina was scarcely noticeable to the fairly distant eye, but the driver particularly would notice the voice.

He stayed there for ten minutes. Colamina pressed her hand over one ear where the tiny receiver earpiece nestled.

Lars' voice said: "The truck with four men came up another route. Is hidden in a gulley near a eucalyptus grove. I cannot see the men."

"I can," said Kazan's voice. "They are among the eucalyptus trees, crouched down in the grass. Do you see April Dancer?"

"Not since she left the road and headed for that farm." Lars paused. "Is a farm — no?"

"No," said April's voice. "But don't let it worry you. The owner is an old eccentric, but a real sweetie. I am on a horse, coming through that same eucalyptus grove. At least, I hope it's the same one. Where is Colamina?"

"Stopped at a vantage point around the bend from the grove. The driver is either timing himself or waiting for a signal."

"They won't signal," said April. "Hear me, Colamina — start chewing that gum immediately the taxi moves off. You know all about the saliva-activated explosive. Keep your nerve and your hat on tight, and don't forget to collapse at the first blow."

"The taxi is backing on to the road," said Lars.

"Do you see Cheval?" Kazan asked.

"He is well out of it, but he gave a signal — no mistaking that. He warned them her taxi was coming. I am now leaving my view point. Contact out."

The driver saw his passenger chewing gum, saw one hand pressing down the floppy hat. Not long now, he thought. Then he'd be free to get back to that poker game in the hut behind the warehouse. He'd pay up the rent, buy the kids something special, give momma a treat and relax happily until the boat's next trip. It wasn't such a bad life really.

He swung the taxi deep into the grove, stopped, and sprang out. He pulled open the rear door, levelled his gun, and said politely: "Step out, if you please — quickly." If he hadn't been so sure that everything was arranged perfectly, he might have wondered why his passenger made no protest.

She stepped out, clutching her basket and chewing gum. Figures slithered from the trees. The taxi driver holstered his gun. Colamina moved quickly away from the taxi — facing the two men approaching her, not seeing the other two coming from the rear. But she knew there were four, so braced herself as she heard scuffing feet. Something thudded on to her head. She gave a moan and sank to the ground.

The U.N.C.L.E. skull-protector absorbed the main impact, but the blow made her ears sing for a few minutes. The four men were about to reach down to grab her when the driver yelled and they all turned. Colamina took the gum from her mouth and threw it a well-judged

distance.

Action exploded in the green eucalyptus grove. Lars and Kazan rushed into the grove, dart guns levelled. The gum exploded under the front of the taxi. The driver was hurled back, to sprawl huddled, one arm shattered, blood spurting.

Two of the men drew guns. As they fired at Lars and Kazan, so April lunged her horse through the trees, to crash into their backs. Colamina leapt to her feet, snatching her dart gun from the basket. One of the other men flung a knife at her. It struck below her breasts. She fired once. The sleep dart hit him dead between the eyes, knocking him flat.

April Dancer leapt from the horse, gripped the fourth man, slashed twice at his gun arm, then pivoted to throw him bodily against the shattered taxi. Kazan and Lars made short work of the first two men, then Kazan ran to Colamina's side. She was gently easing out the knife.

"*Mon Dieu!* This is terrible! Hold on to me, *ma cherie*."

"Why should I?" said Colamina calmly. "I am not hurt. But I am too hot!" She flung off the heavy hat. Perspiration made a crown around her glossy hair and dewed her forehead and nose. "I shall stifle if I do not take off this..." She scratched her ribs. "*Yoy!* It is worse than a corset in this weather!"

"Go among the trees and strip off," said April. "Those safety vests aren't usually so hot, but that's one of the early models." She gripped Colamina's arm. "But you were real cool. Now leave this to us."

Lars said: "I get their truck — ya?"

April nodded. "Pronto, Lars, pronto."

Kazan gazed after Colamina. "She is wonderful, is she not?"

"Cheval must be a top cog to be able to lay this on so fast," said April.

"You are not sorry you took the chance?" Kazan asked.

"No regrets." April walked to the taxi driver. "Did you bring a kit?"

Kazan went to the basket, pulled out the emergency medical kit. "You did not tell me, but I am the good thinker."

"I assumed you were properly trained. Bring it, quickly — his arm is very bad. Collect their guns and go through their pockets while I tend him. Get the darts if you can. No need to advertise our secret weapons."

Colamina's riding gear fitted April as well as the lime-green dress fitted Colamina.

"That feels better," said Colamina, stowing the bullet proof vest in the basket. "Such a lovely dress, April!"

"Keep it," said April. "I'll swop you for that flame and orange island-weave of yours when we get back to the hotel."

"Poor Ysana!" Colamina gazed down at the taxi driver. "Is he badly hurt?"

"Not as bad as it looked." April completed the bandaging. "Poor Ysana my foot — he was willing to lead you to a coshing, or knifing, or worse!"

"Not me — you."

April shrugged. "He's a pawn for profit. I have no pity for pawns. Who would have paid him? Is this a normal sort of service on the island?"

"Not normal, but not unusual since the Palagas obtained a stranglehold on the economy. They teach people lessons — if you know what I mean? One or two are beaten up, left on the hills, miss the boat, have time to reconsider their position — or are kept away from Palaga long enough for certain matters to be adjusted. Yes, I suppose you could call it a service."

"You think they would have killed me?"

"I do not think so. They would teach you a lesson, make you miss maybe two boats, keep you out of circulation. Everyone here would be very kind. We are not violent people. We are very nice, happy-go-lucky people. That is why we do not see what is going on until it is too late and the Palagas use us more or less as they please." Colamina pointed to the four sleeping men. "They are paid by the warehouse company. Hired thugs posing as Customs men. They are changed about every three months."

Lars came with the truck. The wounded taxi driver and the four men were loaded into it. Lars also had collected the scooters.

"Lars, take the truck back along the road. You'll see a track — it winds among the trees. Hide the truck, climb on your scooter and finish the grand tour of the hills before you return to the boat. Try to act a little drunk, as if you'd taken a couple of bottles with you, so you won't have to speak, then you can reach the launch without giving away your accent."

"Forget the deposit on the scooter," said Kazan. "I overpaid for the hire of all of them. What about Colamina?" he asked as Lars backed the truck on to the road.

"She comes with me on the horse," said April. "We'll double back to the old man's place."

"Tarancita," said Colamina. "You must have charmed him into lending you his horse."

April frowned. "Tarancita? That's his name? He speaks perfect English."

"We call him Tarancita. It means, he who hides — or, more literally, the shy vegetable. Tara means a fern — a special green plant, very hard to find here. Tarancita lives with his goats and olive trees, and does not bother anyone."

"And has a telescopic radio mast buried in his garden, and a powerful radio camouflaged by an old-fashioned dresser," said April. "I have an eye for such things — it's part of my job — though I guess the casual caller would miss them."

Colamina shrugged. "I did not know. That is true, April."

"But you know him?"

"Of course."

"He reminds me of someone," said April thoughtfully. "All that white hair and big white beard still doesn't stop me being reminded. He's just a harmless old recluse, I suppose? Came here to die — but has radio as a secret hobby. Would that be right?"

"I do not think he is near dying, and the radio is a big surprise to me — but perhaps it should not be."

"Why not?"

"He is the father of Chas. He has been here many years. Chas always visits him, brings him supplies. Perhaps the radio belongs to Chas?"

"That Chas!" April exclaimed. "Didn't you include his father in your section of the research report?"

"Yes, of course I did. But only that he lived alone on the island and was an old man."

April nodded slowly. "What else could you say? And we wouldn't probe it too hard. The English research reported the father as 'retired to live abroad — believed dead — no contact with known relatives'." She smiled. "Our Chas becomes more and more interesting!" She looked at Kazan. "What the hell are you dozing around here for?"

Kazan, one leg hitched over the scooter saddle, was staring hard, but unseeingly, at a parade of red ants passing by.

His head jerked up. "I am struggling with my inferiority complex."

"Couldn't you struggle as you rode? What bee is buzzing in that tiny noble head of yours?"

Kazan sighed. "I cannot become used to working under the authority of a woman. It makes me nervous. To a woman, I like always to be right. If I tell you and I am wrong, I shall lose my dignity."

"Oh, good heavens! You're worse than a woman, Kazan! Do your job, that's all. If there is something I have to know — tell me."

"Very well. It is Cheval. I have seen him before, but not very close in person, and he looks different in photographs, but I am sure it is he. It is — oh, more than two years since I heard of him."

"In France?"

"In Europe. He is from Alsace, though I think he was born in Brussels. He also is of Switzerland, and some time in Germany. But not Cheval. Andre is right, I think. Andre Charival — or Chamival. I forget which."

"Who is he?"

Kazan smiled. "Like Chas's father — a mystery man. Very shy. He is a scientist — a famous bacteriologist. I go now."

CHAPTER SIX: SEEK, FIND, DESTROY

APRIL slipped aboard *Island Traveller* as misty dusk purpled the harbour, and reached her cabin without seeing anyone or herself being seen. The ship was very quiet, with no passengers and only a skeleton crew on duty.

She opened her cabin door, closed it softly and moved to black out the porthole before switching on the light. As she trod cautiously to reach the switch, she heard a sound of heavy breathing from the bunk. Instead of using the bunk-side switch, she moved to the door, clicked on the light and tensed for trouble.

Mark Slate muttered, turned, yawned, opened one eye. "Put that ruddy light out!"

"Don't swear at me — and say please."

"Please put that ruddy light out."

"There's no need. I'd already covered the porthole before I knew you were here."

Groaning, he eased up, hand scrubbing at his face.

"Aw hell! The first real sleep since I signed on this stinking barge, and you have to come back early." He surveyed her through blinking eyelids. "That's not your gear! Is that blood?" He swung off the bunk. "Are you hurt, me old darling?"

She went coy. "How nice of you to care!"

"Scrub the comedy," he growled. "My back's broken in three places, my hands have more calluses than I can count, my arms are stretched six inches, my belly is in revolt against fish skilly — and I've run out of cigarettes! Just don't be coy or kittenish, or I'll belt you. Got it?"

She smiled. "Aye, aye, sir. Poor Mark! You've had the dirty end this time."

"Yeah — and for what? Nothing I couldn't have discovered as a passenger. I'm buying myself out of this man's navy. You got five hundred dollars?"

"You have to pay that to get released?"

"Yep."

"It's an awful lot."

"Oh, my Gawd! How mean can you get? I'm an awful lot of agent, sweetie — some of your Paris dresses cost that."

He held out his hand. "Come, baby, give — else poppa take. Give me no arguments — just cash. Make it seven hundred. You bet Chas will overcharge on the clothes."

"I might have known he'd be in the swindle."

"Natch. I've been released, officially, by the captain, but it's Chas who pockets the mowlah. He's bringing clothes for me, and I have the cabin next to yours. Broadminded cuss, that Chas."

"He overestimates you and underestimates me," said April. "If you get what I mean?"

"I can't live without you either, darling — ah, thanks — cigarettes!"

She supplied lighter, then counted out money. "You'd better have a round thousand." She wrote on a card. "Just sign that."

"Bureaucracy at its highest level," Mark scoffed. "I have to make an expense report too, y'know. Ain't you got no trust at all, woman?"

"Plenty," said April. "But you might die on me. The Treasury minions never die. They'd take that thousand out of my pension, and you know it."

"Funny," said Mark, scribbling his signature. "Funny, funny world! To think treasure rhymes with pleasure."

"And Treasury rhymes with usury."

"A good point." He exhaled with a satisfied sigh. "Been having a joyous time?"

April pointed to the bunk. "Relax, and I'll tell you. Then we'll have to adjust our ideas."

Speaking quietly, clearly, she reported on the events of the day. Mark was silent for a long time after she'd finished, then said:

"I think we should extract Chas and his pop. No doubt they have their

own little racket — maybe broadcasting messages to the faithful around the islands. I know he's not THRUSH. I believe he knows about them. Likewise, he knows about us. He'll take profit from both, responsibility from neither."

"He saved me from harm — maybe my life."

"Yes, he'd do that. He's a kinky sort of cuss, but I trust him. Don't ask me why. He's got a code of his own. But this Cheval — or Chaminal — whatever his name is — he's a strong link. Yet he was party to a shocking weak ploy. Up to that point we couldn't link him at all. Then, all of a sudden, he involves himself in the most obvious way with the Padracks."

"We're not sure it was the Padracks, though I admit it seems likely."

"Maleski is THRUSH, but not senior to Simon Padrack. I caught enough to convince me of that," said Mark. "And the captain is a weak sister. I think Maleski has a blackmail hold on him. Chas is the king of this castle."

"Chas sold you out — and me too."

"Then tipped you off so you'd escape? That would be a bit devious."

"Chas is a devious character."

"I said: extract him. He clouds the picture. If Cheval — we'll call him that for now — is a top scientist, he's not going grubbing around in petty thuggery — unless…"

"Unless someone convinces him that his own interests are threatened?" said April. "Said someone being the Padracks — or maybe just Lucy Padrack. She was out to kill, but kidded Cheval she aimed only to remove me from the scene. A personal attack, but she used her — hmm — trade connections. It's the way a woman would work."

"Not pausing to consider that if it failed, then she'd have involved Cheval — left him open to suspicion?"

"We're assuming she knows I'm an agent. I don't think she does. But, yes, I think her personal vengeance would override everything else in her mind. I think also that if she suspected I was an agent, she'd pass it on to Simon Padrack and Maleski, and pressure *them* to fit me for a halo. That would give her great satisfaction. Make her feel dominant and oh, so in the right."

"We sail on the midnight tide," said Mark thought fully. "If you keep out of sight until then, she's going to have one helluva shock when you show up. But perhaps she'll know by now. Those thugs would have come round in about five hours. You'll have to watch yourself between here and Taradata, me old darling."

"I don't think she'll try anything on board. Chas wouldn't stand for anything he didn't organize himself."

Mark groaned. "That Chas..." He paused at a tap on the door.

April opened it. Chas stepped into the cabin, carrying packages.

"Dead on cue," said Mark.

"Thought I'd find you here." Chas beamed. "Brought your clothes. All nice stuff. That'll be one hundred, seventy- five dollars, plus twenty-five service charge."

"Pah!" Mark snapped his fingers; "Now how could I forget the service charge?"

"And five hundred for this." Chas waved a piece of paper. "All legal and aboveboard. Been notarized, it has. You were paroled in our custody, y'see. We transfer the parole to the local magistrate and he signs your release." Chas flipped the paper across. "I got the feeling you never ought to have been in that prison, sonny." He grinned. "Nice young fella like you. But then — you will do these things."

Mark looked at the paper. "This is signed by Salisbury. Are you the magistrate too?"

"Nah, not me. That's my Daddy." He smiled at April. "Nice old duck, ain't he? Took a shine to you, he did. He's still got an eye for a nice bit of crackling."

"Yes?" said April weakly. "Thank you."

"And thank you," said Chas, plucking the cash from Mark's hand. "If you can't always be clever, you don't have to be good, y'know." He winked at April and exited.

"Daddy!" said Mark, rolling his eyes ceiling-ward. "That's my Daddy!"

"Crackling!" April snorted. "The dirty old man!"

"Now, now!" said Mark. "Leave us not think ill of the aged. I've an idea

that when my whiskers turn white, I'll be thinking along the same lines."

"You should live that long," April snapped. "Men! Get out, you horrible specimen! Go on — get, get!"

Lots of clichés to describe atmosphere. Cut it with a knife. It's bad or good, disruptive or mellowing. Husbands feel it around wives. Families react to it. Mass meetings are swayed by it. Lovers revel in it. Martinets exude it. Sulkers project it. Good salesmen create it. Atmosphere.

Threaded through its unseen but undeniable presence are a thousand, a million — a thousand million — tiny thought-waves flowing out, slamming back, physically manifested in attitudes of body, tones of voice, reflections in eyes and features. These personal physical giveaways can be controlled by strong-willed characters. Clever actors can, and do, stimulate and simulate atmosphere as a part of their craft.

Experienced operatives in the profession of organizational agent train themselves to receive these unseen influences of atmosphere. A good agent could be called a natural intuitive. This isn't merely a person who plays hunches. His skill is far more exact. It is almost a science. His training also develops a swift and sharply defining observation, similar to that of a top detective. Add this to his acute and finely tuned sensitivity to atmosphere, combined with physical alertness, and you have the formula for a successful top agent. Throw in the backing of a world-powerful organization, and you have a formidable opponent at any level of action.

The Padracks and Cheval were excellent actors. They projected no atmosphere through any physical expression. But to April Dancer and Mark Slate it was there as an emanating source strong enough to confirm that Andre Cheval was not only linked to the Padracks — they had already proved this by the decoy action on the island — but also was superior to them.

This meant that THRUSH had four levels of its operatives aboard *Island Traveller*, with Cheval on the top echelon; certainly not inferior to the Padracks, nor to Maleski. And if he was a scientist, he would be in the executive bracket. This placed the Padracks in field administration over Maleski, who would be in THRUSH'S personnel and field coordinating slot. At the fourth and lowest level were the

hand picked toughies — the slog and sluggem boys, no doubt with their assigned leaders under Maleski.

The affair had at last assumed the true pattern of a THRUSH project. These four levels aboard *Island Traveller* were the nucleus of organization in depth. This was how THRUSH worked. Had to work. A small project of local irritation, or disruption of order, required only a field team of local wreckers. But in a large project they created their operation cells in self-contained units, each linking more closely as the project developed until all were in the end merged.

The nucleus thus expanded, though its nature and purpose did not change. The point at which these merged would be the production end of the project. When this was geared to its maximum, the results would be handled by the distribution or actual attacking forces already set up through their own nucleus centres. Mr. Waverly had intimated that such an organization might well be in existence through the apparently innocent coracle clubs. But this might be a false trail, laid especially for the purpose of diverting attention from the true purpose of the project.

April and Mark used the radio silence period to intensify their thoughts and clarify their future plans. The Padracks were leaving the ship at Taradata. Reports had shown they sometimes stayed over until *Island Traveller* returned on its next outward trip — sometimes they rejoined when the ship checked in on its return trip. The latter call was in a three-day period. The next outward trip would be in three to five weeks. Would Cheval also stay over in Taradata?

Taradata was a pinhead island compared with some of the others. Even Lagelo, the next port of call, was larger and, by all accounts of the researchers, welcomed visitors, as apposed to Taradata, where they did not. Lagelo was a cultured place, owning a fine library and bookshop. Why should Padrack, the bookman, concentrate on Taradata? Perhaps because Lagelo already had been converted to the written word. Assume the book business to be a front, and you had Taradata smack in your sights as a THRUSH production centre. Because Padrack was THRUSH before he was a bookman. Just as April was U.N.C.L,E. before she was a playgirl. Simple as that.

H.Q. would naturally be collating all reports and coming up with a similar result. The next directive to agents would be an S.F.D. April and Mark already were making their own plans to seek, find, and destroy. But proof wasn't yet conclusive. And even U.N.C.L.E. agents cannot proceed to blow up or otherwise disrupt a peaceful island

without cause. Final decisions as to timing and method were often theirs, but *Island Traveller* was not Del Floria's dry-cleaning shop in the shadow of New York's United Nations building, where U.N.C.L.E.'S eyes and ears of the world poured in their proof — or non-proof — and where Mr. Waverly would press the appropriate button according to the measurement of that proof.

So when radio contact again opened, their own atmosphere was one of anticipation and preparedness. They raised Sama Paru in the midget sub at midnight.

"We are surfaced in a cave beyond Taramao Point," said Sama Paru. "It is very beautiful. A silver moon is spiked upon the black-barbed heads of the trees of the forests of the night. The sea is a whispering mirror around us, lapping the golden sands below the blood-red rocks."

"Oh, Gawd!" Mark exclaimed. "Skip the commercial and tell us why you're there."

Randy Kovac came in with a chuckle. "It's gone to his head — a sort of tropic fever, I guess. We've come direct from Mr. Waverly's naval H.Q. and are waiting for Count Kazan and the launch to rendezvous with us here."

"For what purpose?" April asked.

"Observation of coastline, and to chart depth and currents in possible landing areas, apart from the main beaches and harbour. The far side of the island has an unbroken coral reef off-shore. No boat could cross it without being ripped apart."

Mark said: "Do you have any information of landing parties by the Navy?"

"Mr. Waverly did not specify that action," said Randy Kovac.

"Don't *you* start!" Mark snapped. "The word 'no' would have been quite sufficient."

April asked: "Did you meet the launch? Did Kazan deliver a passenger to Mr. Waverly?"

"I'll say he did! Wow! What a dish! Are all researchers like her?" Randy Kovac fairly bubbled.

"They're usually old, fat and greasy," said Mark. "Why didn't the

launch come with you?"

"The Navy doctor was treating Kazan and Carlson."

"Were they sick or injured?"

Sama Paru said: "I have never seen such colds. Poor Kazan — he was so full of cold he could not speak! Wheezing, sneezing, shivering — you would not believe such a cold could be caught in this climate. Carlson was not quite so bad. He is a big man, and he was coughing like a foghorn. Colamina Sherez was one sad lady — all red-nosed and red- eyed."

"Gosh, I'm sorry!" said April. "Tropical colds can be quite bad, but they don't usually last long."

"Get the infra-red camera quickly!" Sama Pam's voice sounded urgent.

Mark and April waited silently after Sama broke off conversation. He came back in a few minutes.

"The maps we have do not show any habitation on Taramao Point — only a forest of small trees running inland, curving down to a valley. But we have just seen lights flickering from there. Randy has taken photos. I have looked through the night glasses. The flickering is caused by the trees moving. The lights are stationary — like a door or windows opening and closing to release light."

"A signal?" said Mark. "Is *Island Traveller* visible to you?"

"No — we cannot see your lights. Wait, now — Randy is checking instruments. There is something else — standby."

Again they waited. Later Sama Paru said: "An engine — or more than one — we have picked up the vibrations. There is also a thudding — rhythmic, like small regular explosions."

"How far?" They heard Sama asking Randy to check instruments and telling him how to obtain readings.

"Two miles, landward," said Sama. "We are about three hundred yards off-shore. The beach shelves deeply towards us so we cannot get closer. Even the launch could not."

"Have you any frogmen's gear on board?"

"Yes, four shallow-water outfits. But we must not leave the sub until

the launch arrives and you also are at Taradata. Those are orders."

"Okay," said April. "Use your time to survey all of the coastline you can. Make a note of any likely landing spots. Randy — what's all this about your special maps?"

"The researchers' plan maps and the regular maps don't tally. Someone's lost a whole section of the island. The contour lines don't tally."

"And you went on record with your own maps?"

"Yes, Miss Dancer." Randy Kovac sounded apprehensive. His grand ambition was to be an agent. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were his heroes, Mark Slate his idol, but woman-wise and agent-wise, April Dancer was his goddess. To please her was to feel the gods smile upon him. To fail her would be stark tragedy.

"Well, if you believe you are right, you should say so," said April cheerfully. "We rely on you back-room boys not to work blindly. The researchers could be wrong. There can't be many modern maps of this part of the world, and they might be too old and badly drawn."

"Oh, they are!" said Randy eagerly. "Indeed they are, Miss Dancer." He laughed ruefully. "Mr. Waverly said that only doughnuts had pieces out of the middle — not islands — so I would be assigned to Mr. Paru for field progress work to check my own figures — so — so here I am."

"Welcome to the rat-race." Mark was friendly. "Sama, did Kazan mention Cheval?"

"Colamina did. Kazan lost his voice. I too remember the name Chaminal. He once went to the Arctic with some expedition to study stresses on the human body — something like that. And he was the man who identified the little bug a few years ago, before we were overrun by an influenza epidemic. Yes — I know of him. A clever man, I think. But these scientists — there are so many. I couldn't say exactly what he is."

"He's not been mixed up in any trouble in Europe?"

"Not to my knowledge."

April's communicator began bleeping.

"Contact out," said Mark to Sama. "H.Q. is on."

April said: "Yes, sir?"

"Ah, Miss Dancer! Is Mr. Slate with you?"

"Here, sir," said Mark. "We've been talking to the D.X.5."

"Good — then you know why the launch is delayed. It is now on its way, Kazan and Carlson having received maximum dosages to help relieve their considerable sufferings. Miss Sherez is aboard here — likewise affected. It is on this matter I call you."

"Yes, sir?"

"You will remember the phial Miss Sherez obtained as sample of contents of boxes now on your ship?"

"I remember," said Mark.

"Mr. Kazan foolishly opened this phial — gently sniffing at the contents, trying to assess its purpose. Mr. Carlson and Miss Sherez also — er — hmm — had a sniff! We have just analysed the contents. They are the most vicious cold virus you could ever wish to meet. That is, if one ever wishes so to do.

"The point is that it appears highly probable that all the boxes contain the same contents. Moreover, we have ascertained that a large quantity of a similar virus, suspended in a jelly, was reported missing from a government research centre close to the Mexican border."

"Reported missing?" said April. "Did they think it walked out?"

"Laboratory jargonese," said Mr. Waverly. "Undoubtedly it was pinched. It appears to have been packed into phials by someone who knew that extreme heat would melt the jelly and make the virus an uncontrollable mass. The jelly has, in fact, melted in the phial. These virus multiply in heat. And as long as they stay in a warm atmosphere, they will continue to multiply. Each phial — if broken — will be a near-lethal bomb in its effect upon those closest to it, who will at once inhale a vast concentration of the virus. Do you follow me?"

Mark said: "Mr. Waverly, sir — we are an astonishing way ahead of you!"

"I thought you might be," said Mr. Waverly. "Do I need to add that there is no possible way of giving immunization? The effects can be treated, but severely dosed persons would die of congestion before

penicillin or other drugs could have any effect. In such a concentration of virus, a mask is some protection. But — as our expert says — it would be as much help as a paper tissue against cigarette smoke. In other words — if you devise a mask to prevent the virus entering mouth and nose, you will suffocate yourself."

"A gas mask?" April suggested. "Or smoke mask?"

"In time, perhaps," said Mr. Waverly. "They have been experimenting on such an appliance for about ten years. In another ten, perhaps…"

"And a ruddy great 'tishoo' to you too!" Mark muttered.

Mr. Waverly overheard it. "Levity will not solve our immediate problem, Mr. Slate. These virus cannot be destroyed by water. Once released, they will be drawn up by the sun, multiply even more in heat, and travel with the breeze. A crucible heat might be effective, but the phials would explode and crack the container — it would need experts to carry it out in specially controlled conditions. I doubt if any exist on the *Island Traveller*, in which these boxes of phials now repose. In fact, we could say you are indeed sitting on them right now."

"We hadn't overlooked the fact," said April. "What are your orders, sir?"

"In the circumstances, Miss Dancer, I have no alternative but to issue an open directive for the guidance of all agents assigned to this project. You now are operating on S.F.D. directive. We are standing by to aid you in any way we can. Seek, find, and destroy. Good luck to you!"

April looked at Mark.

"D'you have a hanky?" he said. "I feel a sneeze coming on."

CHAPTER SEVEN: COOPERATION PLUS

THE enemy — and THRUSH forever was the enemy — in the form of Lucy Padrack had, through personal weakness, betrayed the presence of an operative cell aboard *Island Traveller*.

The personal weaknesses of April Dancer and Mark Slate lost them much of the advantage they had gained. Perhaps the word "weakness"

is unfair. No one told the passengers the E.T.A. of *Island Traveller* at Taradata. Most passengers didn't care. The islands were off the rat-race routes of the world. Most people were merely seeking sun and fun — not timetables. Mark made his own estimation, but they should have checked. They didn't.

They slept too late. No radio calls through ear and pillow receivers disturbed them. They reached the dawn-gilded deck in time to see the flat-decked harbour launch bobbing shorewards. On the launch were the Padracks, Cheval, and a cluster of boxes.

"S. and F.," said Mark glumly. "But D.? Not this time."

"Let's not feel too bad," said April. "We agreed last night that, short of calling in the Navy, we couldn't capture the ship single-handed. And we couldn't chuck the boxes overboard, even if we'd battled our way to the hold."

"But we could have tried. We just slept." Mark cussed softly as Chas came towards them. "So your V.I.P.s have special treatment, huh?"

Chas peered shorewards. "Who — them? They always get taken off first."

Mark saw Kazan's launch speeding towards the ship.

"Your rich boy-friend has arrived. Devoted, ain't he?" said Chas. "Why don't you hail him and ask him to take you off for a trip?" There was a hard edge to his voice.

"Why should I? If it's any of your business?"

"Suit yourself. Only trying to be helpful," said Chas. "But if you don't get off now — you'll stay aboard. The island is barred to visitors on this trip."

"What have they got?" said Mark. "Rabies?"

The brown eyes surveyed him calmly, quizzically. "It'd be nice to know," said Chas softly. "Very nice, it would be — to know just what they have got."

April looked steadily at him. "It had to come, Chas. You knew that, didn't you? Both ends against the middle is okay while you can keep swinging. Comes a time when they close up. Then you duck out and let them go ker-plonk. But if you can't duck…"

Mark said: "Ker-runch! Nasty! Not nice, eh, Chas?"

"Nah!" The brown eyes danced with defiant laughter. "Like you say, mate — not nice."

"Mate?" said Mark. "Not sonny?"

"You got to grow up sometimes. Could be now."

"Not money, Chas," said April. "We've got money. From us you can't buy."

Chas nodded. "And a Navy over the horizon."

"But you don't scare?" said Mark.

"Daddy warned me," said Chas. "They've never done this before. You tell. I play. There comes a time."

"Palaga backing?" said April. "Palaga company? The Taradata boat trade? Economy sewn up? Restricted travel? A deposed chief? Introduction of guards? All radio contact through new authority? Slow, very slow."

"And plenty profit for the taking?" said Mark. "Lush pickings. New engines, special cargo rates. Even pirates never had it so good."

Chas nodded. "You know some good history. That's how it was."

"So now you want out?"

"Nah — I want in. Some of my people are in the valley." He jerked his thumb at the shore-line. "Up to two trips ago they came to meet me. Then only a few. Then none at all. Now they've sealed the port. No one goes out. No one comes in — except them lot. I'd empty the ship at Lagelo. Fill it with my people. I'll open this port — you bet. Thugs I take as part of the game. But not funny-looking phials, nor top scientists. Not on these islands."

April took off her headscarf and flagged the launch. Kazan saw and zoomed an arc, to curve back to the ship.

"I'm going to reccy," she said. "Hold Kazan while I get my gear."

The launch bumped the side as April reappeared. Captain Sidano came down from the bridge. Chas said: "Go astern, Cap'n."

"But Maleski says…"

"Rot your guts!" Chas bellowed. "Go astern!"

April said quietly to Mark: "Crunch coming. You can handle?"

"Sure. Get going. We'll be in touch. Warn the sub and Waverly."

She was down the rope ladder and into the launch when Maleski came thumping up.

"Get below — both of you," he snarled.

Chas winked at Mark.

"Get knotted," said Chas.

"My sentiments entirely," said Mark.

"Come," said Maleski. "Move." A gun was levelled on them.

Mark moved. So did Chas. Mark chopped the gun-wrist, crashed a foot against Maleski's knee-cap. Maleski buckled, but swung a fist, spinning Mark away. His foot kicked the gun. Sheer luck. It shot overboard.

Maleski bellowed orders. Chas whistled — a long, fluting call. Maleski went to put the boot in as Mark stumbled. Chas hooked his foot under Maleski's raised leg. Maleski fell on Mark, who squirmed away, rolling, then jumping, cat-like.

Maleski's men came pounding from amidships. Chas's own seamen sprang from the bridge and positions aft. Followed melee-filled seconds of turmoil. Difficult to see who was doing what to whom. Mark and Maleski, clear of the THRUSH men. Maleski heavier, swinging blows, using the boot to groin and stomach. Mark weaving, darting in with numbing blows.

Leader of the THRUSH men, flaying air with a cargo hook, reached them as Mark pivoted to dance out of Maleski's boot range. Maleski lunged into the man's path as the hook slashed down, intended for Mark's face. It tore open Maleski's skull. The blow, together with his own impetus, crashed him against the deck rail. He crumbled, dangling doll-like, before sliding over — bumped once on a porthole, and dropped into the sea.

Mark caught the THRUSH man, who stood transfixed by surprise, and applied a lever lock with such force that the man's arm snapped and

his shoulder was dislocated. The hook dropped as he sprawled away.

Two more THRUSH men broke clear of Chas and his sea men. Mark attempted to leap away so as to strike as they came past. His foot stumbled on the THRUSH leader. As his body angled, so a heavy shoulder crashed into him like a charging bull. Mark was flung up and back. He hit the rail, grabbed vainly at air, then plummeted backwards.

His brain flashed warnings. From this height a belly-flop into the sea would split his guts open. He spun his body in mid-air, straightened arms and legs as the cool green mass rushed up at him.

Not really cool. Surprisingly warm. He went deep in a tortuous, unending dive. Tortuous because his lungs, already pressured by the fight, had not had time to fill. Steel clamps locked around his chest. His ears sang with pressure. He had no breath to exhale. Could not inhale.

Willpower alone kept him from panic, forcing his body to act smoothly to help his upward travel. Long, agonizing seconds moving through a green cavern. Then growing lighter, amber-green, to burst into sunlight, mouth retching, gasping, as he trod water.

Swiftly recovering, Mark began to swim. Maleski's body lay, face downwards, sleeping on the green-sea couch. The ship now was going astern, very slowly. Mark swam around — saw the launch heading towards Taramao Point.

Suddenly the ship's engines stopped. Mark trod water, searching for a rope, not wanting to go back to where the ladder hung. He heard a low whistle, looked up as a rope snaked down: Captain Sidano's head appeared over the rail as he hitched the rope to a stanchion. Mark swung up, using feet on the hull and fast-hauling on the rope.

Sidano said: "Maleski is dead?"

"Yup. You changed sides, skipper?"

"I am still captain of a ship. I cannot support murder or mutiny, nor leave a passenger to drown."

"Hallelujah!" Mark squeezed water from his hair. "Thou hast seen the light!"

Sidano's heavy face creased in what appeared to be a smile. It made

him look as if he were going to cry.

"And great shall be my salvation! I must lower a boat to pick up the body. Maleski was killed by one of his own men. You are a witness."

"What goes on?" Mark indicated the far side, now hid en by the superstructure.

"Chas is in control. The seamen have overpowered Maleski's men. I do not know who you are, but legally you are a free man, even though we signed you on from the same prison as them. There are things I do not understand."

Mark thumped the captain's chest with a stabbing finger.

"In that, my crafty captain, you are not alone. But this I tell you — there now is only one side on this ship. You will obey orders, or, so help me, I'll call up our Navy and have you and the whole caboodle arrested."

"But I have done nothing wrong. Even now, I do all the right things. I do not break the law of the sea."

"What nationality are you?"

"Me? I am Palaganian."

"I might have known it. Anyway — forget your seagoing purity. We can still arrest you and apologize later."

Sidano pulled a package of letters from his pocket. His strong, stubby fingers shredded them into small pieces — confetti floating seawards.

"Now there is nothing that anyone can arrest me for — at any time."

"You must have been off the bridge and into Maleski's belongings before he hit the water."

Sidano spat over the side. "I already had them while he was helping the Padracks. Later, I would have killed him." He beamed his tearful-looking smile. "I am such a happy man this lovely morning. Ah, but you would not understand how it feels to see a blackmailer die!"

"I can imagine," said Mark, wringing out his shirt. "What was the object?"

"Only to use my rank, my signature as a Palaganian captain, my

silence about certain types of cargo. Some equipment must not be carried on a Palaganian island ship unless it is supplied by Palaga. Many things like that could not be done without the captain's knowledge."

Mark squee-jeed his pants. "What type of equipment?"

"Laboratory equipment used for medical research. Anything that can be used for processing must come through Palaga. Also presses — small power presses. Such things are forbidden. Palaga is protected by International Law. No other ship would carry them to the islands. Palaga controls all the Customs in the islands."

"Including Taradata?"

"Ah! You must ask Chas about that. He knows more of how somebody has got control. You know he is the owner?"

"So he told me. And you've been double-crossing him?"

"No, that is not so. Well — at first, perhaps, but not for the later trips."

"Palaga — one-time paradise of the pirates!" Mark exclaimed. "As Chas would say: a nice bunch of rake-off merchants you are! But, my God! Don't you squeal when things get out of control! The trouble is, the damage you do has to be cleaned up by somebody else."

"Why, yes," said Sidano. "No respectable pirate ever cleaned up after himself!... That is my little joke," he added hastily.

"I'm laughing my head off!" Mark pulled on his shirt.

"Okay, Sidano — back to your bridge. We're going into Taradata."

"The owner will tell me — not you."

"I am telling you. You're not the only people who can play pirates. Obey orders, or I'll call up a boarding party." Mark left Sidano, ran between the holds, met Chas on the way.

"Sidano will do as he's told," said Chas. "I overheard you talking." He pointed upwards. "I was looking for him to order stop ship, so we could pick you up." He grinned. "That was a nice howdedo! Our regular crew have been wanting to have a go at Maleski's men — so have I." Blood oozed from cuts on his arms. His knuckles were skinned, one eye puffed in promise of a blue-black "shiner". "I'm going

below to cure these cuts." Chas surveyed Mark. "You ain't cut, are you? Got to be careful in this part of the world."

"I'm not cut, but I'll come with you. Tell the captain to stay stopped for a while longer."

"Okay. See you in the purser's office."

Mark went to his own cabin, collected certain gear, including special assault devices, then decided to make a quick change so as to fit on some secret body attachments because his clothes were shrinking — a fact he hadn't allowed for. "All nice stuff!" he chuckled. "That Chas is going to lose some of his profit on this gear!"

Fortunately, the U.N.C.L.E. communicator and other electronic devices were waterproofed. A quick test showed these were functioning well. He made a three-way link-up between April Dancer on the launch, Sama Paru in the submarine, and Mr. Waverly on his floating H.Q.

"I'll come back to you in a short while," said Mark. "Standby."

What Chas called the purser's office was at the end of the passenger cabins. Mark hadn't seen inside it. The door was double-locked, with a steel outer. He now saw why. Smallish, with a domed ceiling, the air pungent with the smell of incense. Bright-coloured woven mats, small, odd-shaped, formed a circle beneath a rack of glistening gold, purple and flame-red robes. Chas was kneeling on the mats, stripped to his waist. He turned.

"Shut the door, please." His voice was quieter, deeper, and had lost its cockney intonation. He pointed to a heavily ornamented flask on a shelf next to the robes. "Will you help me?"

"Surely. How?"

"Take the flask. Pour some of the contents slowly over my head, then over the cuts. Take no notice of me."

When Mark turned from lifting the flask, he saw that Chas was now completely still — the stillness of death. No movement of chest or stomach as in normal breathing. No flicker of life in the wide-staring eyes. Mark observed this, but made no comment as he poured the liquid Chas had requested. This done, he gently sniffed the flask. The liquid was scented — not unlike lavender water. He replaced the flask, then turned to see the cuts bubbling as if the liquid consisted of peroxide of hydrogen or a similar fluid.

After nearly five minutes the life returned to Chas's eyes, and his body moved in rhythmic breathing. He began to speak in a foreign tongue, softly, gently. Mark caught the words "Y-Shan-U" and what sounded like "*Mort ah mortshan ah mort, deeya, deeya*", but the rest was spoken too fast and too softly to catch.

Then Chas quivered, blinked his eyes, moved his arms. The bubbling on the cuts had ceased. In fact, no cuts were now visible, merely slight crustations of dried blood. Chas brushed these away so that only a few whitish marks remained on the skin.

He smiled up at Mark. "Thanks." He rose to his feet.

"Self-induced trance?" said Mark. "Part of your religion?"

Chas nodded. "I thought you'd be interested." He glanced at the flask. "That's only water, y'know. Drink some, if you like. A little oil of lavender rubbed on the rim gives the spirit some pleasure. It likes music too. And colour."

"The faith of the flowers, the bird songs, and the colours of earth, sea and sky," said Mark quietly. "I've heard of it. Y-Shan-U,"

"S'right," said Chas, reverting to his cockney accent. "Y-Shan-U it is. But you don't need to bother your head about it. Just wanted you to see that it works."

Mark smiled. "And some of your faithful are on Taradata? Your own people on Lagelo want them to return. You have promised they will. If there were free entry and exit, you could bring them off because you can hypnotize them. But the time has gone on and on until now you realize they may be prisoners there. Today, to all except special persons, entry and exit is banned. You can't reach them. But if you return to Lagelo without them — eh, Chas? What will happen?"

Chas shrugged. "They'll likely chop me ruddy head off." He pointed to the robes. "And I'll certainly lose me little Boy Scout lot." He grinned. "You sure are quick at figuring. How d'you do it? I thought my performance would impress you. It ain't a fake, y'know."

Mark chuckled. "I know it isn't. That's how you survived your terrible treatment in the war. You hypnotized yourself to resist pain. Many eastern religions have priests who can do that — from fire walking to sticking bamboo rods through their skins."

"Yeah — I can do that too. So you know more than most people. But

you couldn't know I'm in a spot over our people on Taradata."

"It had to be something like that — mate." Mark grinned. "There was no money in it for you in changing sides — or ceasing to be neutral. You've built yourself a way-out reputation among the islands. Probably it was you who revived an ancient religion, using your power of hypnosis to add colour. I guess it grew faster and bigger than you expected."

"You can say that again!" said Chas. "It went like a bomb. All a giggle at first. Made me feel secure and important — and wanted. S'funny, ain't it? Even my old Daddy believes in me. Who was that bloke who created another bloke what did him up?"

"Frankenstein?"

"That's him. That's me too. But it's not all fake — not by a long way. To me, perhaps — or it was — but not to them. I really can cure people. I really can 'see' things — sense 'em — always have been able to. But they expect me to do ruddy miracles!" Chas sighed deeply. "Oh, mate, wotta mess! And a relief too. You're the only man I've ever told."

"Are your 'wives' your followers?"

Chas nodded. "All except the Palaga one. They all visited the island and fell in love with me — or me flippin' image."

"And subscribed heavily to your funds?"

"S'right."

"But the Palaga one did it on a strictly business basis?"

"Well, y'know them Palagas — hard-faced lot, they are. Her papa owns the ruddy wharf, she owns the warehouses with her brother. What you might call a marriage of convenience, like."

Mark chuckled. "Oh, brother! I never met a man who could lose his head in so many places! Why don't you just pocket your cash and fly out into the deep blue yonder?"

"Me?" Chas yelped. "Why should I? I love it around here. Besides — I got fifteen children. I loves kids. And I likes me freedom."

Mark rolled his eyes. "Freedom, he calls it! Okay, mate — here's where you earn it. From you I want cooperation plus, else there's going to be

fifteen orphans, five widows, and a leaderless army of the faithful. Got it?"

Chas nodded. "I not only got it — looks like I'm stuck with it!"

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE TARA

APRIL DANCER digested Mark Slate's latest information, linking it with Sama Paru's report and her own observations.

"Randy Kovac is right," she said. "The maps are not accurate. We don't want to enter the harbour yet — can't, anyway, they've swung two harbour craft side-on across the entry channel. *Island Traveller* is standing off."

Mr. Waverly said: "You've checked the beaches?"

"Yes, sir. Our way was barred by a bevy of beautiful pearl divers — or that's what they claimed to be. We couldn't get the launch past them. They were trailing a steel-cable net. We went back to the cave below Taramao Point and found the coracles which Mr. Paru and Randy Kovac saw being towed out to moorings during the night."

"Then they must have been brought down the rock- face?"

"Yes, sir. The sound of a motor-driven hoist was heard. They appear to be lowered four at a time. Native swimmers tow them to mooring rings in the rocks. The boats cannot be seen from the sea."

Mr. Waverly said: "Come in, Mr. Slate. Why?"

"The man Chas says he was told these were ex-invoice exports."

"Meaning someone on the island was fiddling the export quota? How many have been removed in this way?"

"At a rough guess — over a period — about six thousand. They're easily stowed, and very light."

"Does he know their worth?"

"No, sir."

"Then I will tell you. Within the last twenty-four hours we have received information that these craft are bought in the States for not

more than three hundred dollars. They are all — repeat all — sold to the coracle clubs. THRUSH agents in those clubs take personal delivery. The local island lining is replaced by plastic to make them more seaworthy in the hands of learners, the original lining being some sort of leaf or bark which is not obtainable at home. Simple and cheap, Mr. Slate. Hours of innocent pleasure for three hundred dollars. Why should anyone want, or need, to swindle the exporters? You tell me that special hatches were cut in the ship's hull, special lifting gear installed, special bulk heads and panelling. That is a colossal outlay for such a comparatively low-priced article."

"Yes, sir, and Chas received ten dollars commission for each one — on top of freight charges."

"Absurd," said Mr. Waverly. "It doesn't make sense."

April cut in: "But it does, sir, if the actual exporter wanted to cover up the number he was sending out from the island."

"Good gracious, Miss Dancer — you would think they were made of gold!"

"They've made a lot of gold for certain people out here," said Mark. "All the seamen receive a cash bonus for handling that cargo. They'll work it at any hour of the day or night. In fact, they call them their little golden boats of Taradata.

"And they pay the same rate for sending the repaired boats from Palaga. These come all the way from the States. They rip out the broken plastic, re-weave the hull, then ship them back here to be re-lined — and re-exported." Mark laughed. "I still can't see who makes the profit. The Palaganians charge at least a hundred dollars to repair them. It's a handcraft job. Freight and commission swallows another fifty. Then they have to be lined, and shipped all the way back — for only three hundred dollars. Even THRUSH isn't that crazy."

"That's it!" April exclaimed. "That's the one thing that stands out. The boats are woven in Taradata, but they also can be woven — as when they are repaired — in Palaga. Does THRUSH build up to control of an island just to make little boats that can also be made somewhere else?"

"Yes," said Mark. "Because they have. So what's 'it', Lady Brain?"

"'It' is the lining, you dope!"

"Charming," said Mark. "A few pressed leaves or malleable bark..." He

broke off, then added softly: "Containing a new drug?"

April said tensely: "Which grows only on Taradata?" Mark continued: "And is not known in its original state, and li'l ol' toy boat is so cute with its li'l ol' lining." He paused. "If Chas knew this, I'll hang him from the mast arm, so help me!"

"Go to it," said Mr. Waverly. "S.F.D. is still operative. I shall expect to hear from you by midnight."

Free from the continual presence of his blackmailer, his roughneck auxiliary crew, and other pressures aboard his ship, Captain Sidano assumed a new stature. Chas helped in this transformation. Previously, he had maintained a neutral role. Although the owner, he liked working around *Island Traveller*. He could observe everything, especially those things which gave him massive profits, and was able to check on others which might increase costs. But he hadn't actively concerned himself with the running of the ship. He'd been content to follow a policy of them-as-pays-most-has-most-say. Now, he cooperated with Mark and supported his captain.

The THRUSH-recruited thugs were manacled in the for'ard hold under charges of murder, mutiny, and breaking of parole. Several of them talked freely, declaring that their orders, after landing on Taradata, were to report to a man named Tom-Tom, who would issue them with weapons and uniforms. They would then be enrolled as guards. A large cash bonus had been offered, half to be paid on landing, half at the end of their work. Whatever work that was to be, they didn't know, but it didn't take much guessing to class it as some form of brutality. They were those sort of men.

Captain Sidano collected statements from witnesses. One of the other passengers, disturbed by the noise, had come on deck in time to witness the killing of Maleski and the ferocious fight between Chas and his seamen and Maleski's men. Sidano covered himself, his owner and the crew by these statements, and entered his log accordingly. Then he set *Island Traveller* out to sea, where he performed a burial service on Maleski.

"I am now at your service, gentlemen, and wait your orders," said Sidano, when all was completed. "I have some passengers who would like to visit Taradata, but they do not insist. I have cargo to unload, but that can wait, if necessary. My ship and crew are now under my full control. You will inform me of your decisions?" He strode away to his cabin.

Chas chuckled. "Regular old sea-dog, ain't he? Ex-Merchant Navy, y'know. Couldn't get used to the free and easy island ways. Sort of lost his direction for a while. Could have finished up a suicide, or a lush, boozing himself to death on some island. I've seen it happen before. I reckon it's thanks to you we've all come to our senses. Free and easy is a fine way of living. There's only one drawback. Nothing comes free, and living too easy rots a man and prostitutes a woman." He grinned at Mark. "Sort of corny, huh? Little ol' corn philosopher, that's me. Sorry I called you sonny. You're a fine young fella. I still dunno what mob you belong to, but you can count me in."

Mark laughed. "My 'mob' will be happy to have you help us." He called up April Dancer in the launch.

In an hour she had rejoined the ship. Kazan and Lars Carlson also came aboard. Kazan was still a sick man. The virus had hit him hard, although injections helped keep down his temperature and eased the congestion. They gathered in the captain's cabin as *Island Traveller* rode at anchor. Chas was tending the passengers' needs.

"A false shore-line?" said Captain Sidano. "How can that be possible?"

"It's possible right enough," said April. "Your ship couldn't get close enough inshore to use the powerful glasses you need."

"A deep breakwater to turn the tides around the headland," said Lars. "Then they dredge the beaches and bull doze the sand further out. In six months, you would have a new outline. The tides would help. Also they would give deep water in the coves below Taramao Point. Ya — it has been done."

Mark peered through the porthole "Three or four native huts, palm trees, a background of tropical foliage. Looks innocent enough."

"The whole of the background is false," said April. "As false as a movie back-projection. A great scenic slab. I bet the few clumps of greenery are plastic. They flop in the breeze. Not like the real thing at all, but you have to bring them to close focus to see it."

"And who would — a-a-shoo! — bodder?" said Kazan, wheezing terribly.

"Not many visitors would bother," said Sidano. "They take pretty camera shots — that is all. And those beaches have been banned to visitors for a long time. There are big signs saying 'Stone fish in great numbers — keep out or die'. That scares off strangers. And there are

guards who stop anyone else. Gradually, the area back of the small port itself has been closed to visitors."

"So they move their shore-line and build a scenic barrier to hide whatever they've got back of the beaches. What used to be there, Captain?" Mark asked.

"A valley, some native long huts, sugar plantations, and, of course, the Tara hills rising up to Taramao Point through the tara growth."

"What is tara growth?" April asked.

Sidano spread his hands about fourteen inches apart. "A fern plant with fronds about so big, but the fronds are so close it looks like a large fan. It is peculiar to this island, and obviously gave it the name — The word data itself means time — the time the tara plant was ready for picking by the islanders, who line their boats with it — the little coracles and small fishing craft. They also use it to thatch their houses. It has many local uses." He chuckled. "Even to make a local drink. I never tasted it, but old sailors have told me it is most foul but a great cure for scurvy and other ailments."

"This stuff doesn't grow anywhere else?" April asked.

Sidano shrugged. "Not in this form. It is something to do with the soil. I believe there is a tara fern in New Zealand, but it does not grow like this. The island tara has to be cut very carefully, and there is an art in its drying and pressing. And if they do not cut it, it will overwhelm all their homes." He pointed through the porthole to Taramao Point. "Those trees are all tara ferns which have been left to grow. The bark of those is stripped to make the coracles. Once the trees reach about eight or nine feet high, they stop growing, but they will make new bark." He looked at April and Mark. "But is this not an idle conversation? We have missed the tide this morning. Do we wait for the later tide or sail to Lagelo? The boats across the harbour mouth are foolish. I can crunch them aside with my ship."

April glanced at Mark, who nodded.

"We go in on the tide, Captain. You will tie up at the dock and unload your cargo in the usual way."

Mark said: "Would this mean an overnight stop? You can't unload and take on cargo and still get out on the tide?"

Sidano nodded. "That is so. I will advise my passengers not to leave

the ship. I cannot guarantee your safety if you go ashore, and I do not have enough men to go with you as guards."

"We'll handle our end," said Mark. "You use your men for the work and to prevent any attempt at a takeover of the ship."

"You think this might happen?"

Mark shrugged. "If they hadn't closed up the island, I'd say no. But as things are — yes, they might try it."

"Then I think you should call upon your own country's Naval craft, which is a day's sailing from us, and request the assistance of a landing party," said Sidano briskly. He smiled. "To protect their nationals, of course. We do not want Palaga screaming about an international incident and claiming millions of dollars compensation. I am Palaganian, and I know how we work these things."

"Keep the idea in reserve," said Mark. "If we disappear, then no one gets off the island until we're found." He looked at April and the others. "Agreed?"

April nodded. "Ya," said Lars. "It is our job first."

"Use it as bluff," said Kazan, speaking more clearly now that his latest injection had taken effect. "Radio ashore. Tell dem you're cubbing id — but you'll call up de Davy to protect pashengers. Pardod by English!"

"Good idea," said April. "A captain would take such precautions."

"I bet they reply that passengers on board will not be molested," said Mark. "That safeguards the ship, and leaves us on our own if we go ashore. Which suits us."

"It is all very foolhardy," said Sidano. "I do not see the need."

"You stick to your job," said April. "We'll do ours. We're used to working alone. If my people wanted to use the Navy, they'd have done so. What is the island set-up? Who are Lodori and Tom-Tom?"

"Lodori is a doctor, also the island's teacher. Tom-Tom is cousin to Mareet, the present chief who deposed Kuala. They call him 'Boy' Kuala. He is quite old, but has a boyish face. The Mareets have Palaga blood. The Kualas have not. Kuala's daughter, Imali, married Tom-Tom, after her sister Iloni refused him." The captain shrugged. "These

islands have many troubles like that. All family matters — not bad, unless foreigners interfere. I think this has happened on Taradata. We keep out of them. It is best."

"So Mareet is chief. Where is Kuala?" Mark asked.

Again Sidano shrugged. "We do not ask. It is their affair."

"We'll make it ours now," said April. "It should be interesting."

CHAPTER NINE: SELECTIVE KILL

IT happened as they expected. The Taradata port officer told Captain Sidano to bring his ship in on the next tide, to keep his passengers aboard, and to discharge and take on cargo in time to leave on the morning tide. He even gave an official reason for the landing ban — an epidemic of island fever, a reason to which no authority could object — nor query — as it was backed by the Taradata medical officer, Dr. George Lodori.

The U.N.C.L.E. team — except Sama Paru and Randy Kovac, who were well out to sea in the submarine — made their plans, which included taking several of the younger passengers joy-riding in the launch. Lars Carlson shed his wig and sunglasses. Count Kazan, recovering with each hour, acted the gracious, wealthy host. They all swam and frolicked in the sea within sight of the beaches.

Clusters of gorgeous-looking girls waved to them, but didn't swim out from the sands. Obviously, they were as much guards as ornamental local colour, and already had fixed the steel-mesh net below the water so that no propeller-driven craft could pass without being smashed up.

April, Mark and Lars took it in turns to swim under water. But only one at a time left their guests, so the fun and games were not interrupted, and the cutting shears passed from one to the other until the whole mesh had been severed, sinking to the sea bed.

Lars raised the sun awning on the launch, adding colour and covering from shore-based binoculars his own activities of preparing certain weapons and assault aids. Kazan kept their guests amused on the inflatable raft, even serving drinks and providing paper sunshades to protect the lady visitors' fair skins. There were all the outward and visible signs of wealth and leisure combined for the delight of everyone.

This also helped April and Mark to relax in preparation for the action ahead. Mark got rid of his whiskers fairly painlessly, but Lars's idea of a hair-trim was the "chop- chop-ouch!" variety. Mark emerged half-scalped — the massacre being covered by a jaunty red-bobble cap. It so changed his appearance that the passenger-guests failed at first to recognize him.

Several miles east of them, beyond the anchored *Island Traveller*, the Dx5 submarine cruised the sea depths at low speed, stopping every now and then as it overran the tide-rise. They hoped to be directly under the towering slope of Taramao Point at the same time as *Island Traveller* slipped into harbour. Already the shadows were lengthening over the Point when the launch returned to the ship; which immediately started engines, upped anchor, and swung shoreward.

Sidano put her astern before actually entering harbour. One of the stern hatchways opened. Two coracles were lowered into the water, April Dancer and Mark Slate slid down the guide-ropes into the tiny craft, carrying special oars made that afternoon by *Island Traveller*'s chippy — who had also given them expert tuition in coracle handling.

Opposite the beach — dark material draped over her white hull, paint daubed on bright metal — the launch sidled in on the tide, its drift corrected by Kazan with one expertly-wielded oar over the stern. In the cave, the submarine surfaced very slowly. Two rubber-suited figures emerged onto the hull. One swung into the sea, carrying a grappling anchor to one of the rocks, then returned to the submarine. Sama Paru whispered: "Ready?" Randy Kovac nodded. Both men snapped on headgear and visors, slid into the velvet-dark sea, and began silently to swim to the rock-face.

As *Island Traveller* tied up, the cargo-dock lights and the ship's own deck lights came on almost together. Their reflection sheened the water, flared against the harbour arms, casting inky-purple shadow over the two coracles paddling to shallow water.

At last April and Mark lifted the tiny craft clear of the water and on to the sand, then crept on thick-soled overshoes up the shadow of the wall. "There are no stone fish," the seamen had said. "Only the usual risk in stepping from an incoming tide when the deadly barbs may rise from the moving sand. But above the water-line — no."

They reached a fencing laced with barbed wire. Light from the harbour, to the left of it, showed four guards between the fence and a round hut in comparative shadow away to their right. Mark whispered

in April's ear. She nodded, then shedding the overshoes, sped wraith-like to the hut and was lost in its shadow.

Mark removed his own overshoes, trod quietly, to a vantage point of shadow midway, then deliberately kicked sand. The four figures turned like puppets at the sound.

"Hullo!" said Mark softly. "Can you direct me to Fifth Avenue? I'm Father Christmas looking for a present to happen to."

They rushed towards him, then halted after the first impetus of surprise. Three of them hung back to push the fourth guard forward. He held a rifle awkwardly, not aimed but with one hand around the stock, the barrel pointing away from his side.

"I'm sure you haven't got a licence for that," said Mark. "Sorry, fellas." His sleep guns fired with hissing spats at four targets outlined against the distant lights.

He had leapt among them even before they crumpled, ripping away the rifle, hurling it into the sea. It was a silly, unthinking trick, for it made a loud splash. Mark dropped to the sand — waited, breath held. No more guards. Empty space from here to the beach backdrop. A cluster of huts beyond the fence. An opening between, leading to the harbour, from whence came the chug of the winches lifting cargo.

Mark dragged the unconscious guards into deep shadow, then raced to the hut. It was much larger than he expected. Round, with a conical roof, laced with palm and other foliage over cane sticks.

April came close, whispered. "Steel. It's all steel. The jungle stuff is fake top-dressing. Come back here."

Around the far side she lifted a portion of cane and palm leaf, disclosing a large opening the size of a letter-box. They peered through it. The area around the opening vibrated slightly. Air was sucked past their cheeks. A restricted view showed men — native islanders wearing a type of sarong-like mini-kilt of coloured cloth. Some had coloured bangles on their right arms, none on the left. Some wore necklaces of sharks' teeth or shells. The youngest had no such adornment. All were grouped, squatting on their haunches in a semi-circle, around an imposing-looking man with white hair, gnarled hands, high-veined arms, yet a smoothly boyish face.

He was speaking quietly, soothingly, his dark eyes gentle, his white teeth gleaming in the dim light thrown from one electric globe. Two

gaps in his teeth gave him an even more boyish air — almost mischievous. Several of his listeners appeared to be either asleep or entranced by his words.

"Air-conditioned," April whispered. "Vents around the top. This is no native hovel. Surely that's Kuala?"

Mark nodded. "Chief 'Boy' Kuala himself. He's practising Y-Shan-U. Well, it's one way of keeping up their spirits!"

"Hypnotism?" she queried. "Trance states? Will it do them harm if we break it up?"

"Let's try." Mark put his mouth into one end of the slot, called softly "Y-Shan-U" a number of times, while April kept watch.

"He's heard you. He's coming over! " she said suddenly.

Mark bobbed his head down, to see "Boy" Kuala coming close.

"Who calls?" said Kuala.

"I come from the High Priest of Y-Shan-U. He is on the island boat. The great Chas says listen to me. I have come to save your people. You will help me?"

April said: "I'll say he will! He's laughing like a liberated general."

"Listen, Chief Kuala — listen. Tell your men to stand well back from the door. We're going to use explosive. You understand? Boom-boom!"

"My dear chap," said Chief Kuala, "have you no modern explosives? A couple of boom-booms will bring all the guards on you."

April giggled joyously. "Not to worry, Chiefie Boy. We have all mod-cons." She showed Mark the door area cut below an inspection flap. They worked swiftly to pack the quite simple lock with explosive. In two minutes the charge was ready. They packed sand around it, ripped the self-ignitor and stood well back. The lock blew with a flat-sounding "splat". The sand absorbed the vapour. Chief Kuala pushed open the door. Light flared out.

"Wow! Switch off the light — if you can!" April warned.

They shook hands as if just greeting him off a plane. It was all rather unreal, so calmly did Chief Kuala accept their presence. Mark whispered to April: "This makes it easier than we expected. Will you

get all the info we need while I go reccy the other hut and link up with Kazan?"

She nodded. "I'll meet you over by the backdrop — that group of palms."

Mark soon found the same type of inspection flap and lock in the new hut. But this one's occupants were all women, one older than the others, but even she was glowingly handsome. The rest were young and more lovely than the alleged pearl-diving girls had been. All wore native dress, as if they were part of a Bali-Bali film. Mark quickly made contact, his appearance causing considerable surprise and excitement.

The older woman said: "I am Bayee, the wife of Kuala. How is it you come here?"

Mark explained quickly, then told them how he would blow the lock, how they should turn out the light, and at once run to the deep shadow by the palm trees. All went as he intended. Except the exodus.

Lars Carlson and Count Kazan were coming along the beach from their landing point, wearing only swimming trunks and carrying clothes and assault gear in waterproof packs. The girls took them for guards, or at least as belonging to their enemy factions.

Although a ladies' man, not even Kazan could cope with this rush of them. Lars didn't like to use his strength against women, so they toppled him too. Mark leapt to help them. He daren't yell loudly, and warned Bayee not to do so. He could only struggle through the press of lovely, writhing bodies, whispering fiercely: "We're friends, friends! Get back, get back to the trees!"

Mark had an armful of young girl, his face in the tummy of another, when April's cold voice said: "Of all the sex crazy louts! Get up, you over-sexed slob! We've work to do! Hear me, Mark?"

The arrival of Chief Kuala and commands from Bayee soon calmed the girls. They all moved to the shadow of trees.

"They have suffered much at the hands of Mareet's men," said Kuala. "You must forgive them."

"A pleasure," said Lars, grinning hugely. "A lovely welcome — ya?"

April groaned. "I give up! Do I have men or boys with me on this

operation? Get yourselves dressed and your gear ready. We're going in behind this tropical facade and, with the chiefs help, we're going to isolate and destroy all the THRUSH cell on the island."

The check contact came when Sama Paru and Randy Kovac were on a ledge midway between sea and cave. Sama listened carefully, then spoke very softly and briefly to give their position and estimated time it might take for them to reach the valley. He relayed the information into Randy Kovac's ear.

"April and the other three have made contact with the real chief. He and his wife are going with our agents because once the islanders see that Kuala is alive, they will flock to him. That is — all those islanders who have been forced to work for Mareet and, through him, for THRUSH. So every islander left is an enrolled THRUSH member, and we attack accordingly."

"How do we know?" said Randy.

"We say, Y-Shan-U. If they answer, Y-Shan-U, they are Kuala's people. The others just won't answer. They dare not use the words because their own spirits will strike them dumb."

"Lot of mumbo-jumbo." said Randy.

Sama said sharply: "No more than some of our Western mumbo-jumbo. Who are we to judge? Anyway, that's the drill. April, Mark, Kazan and Lars are now behind the false shore-line. April says to thank you for some inspired desk work."

Randy beamed. "What is there?"

"A production-line, no less! A whole row of what look like native long houses but is really a factory. Boat-making one end — then tara processing plant, then laboratory and offices, then an entrance into the headland." Sama pointed upward. "The chief says it is hollowed out into passages and caves. Natives who caused trouble were forced to work up here, stripping bark and digging out the dust."

"What dust?"

"I don't think the chief knows for sure, but the THRUSH scientists use it in their process of curing the tara plant. Our job is to destroy the whole package. No ifs or huts. Got it?"

Randy nodded. "Will I have to kill?"

Sama stared at him. Starlight made Randy's face white. Or *was* it starlight?

"You will know," he said. "Every agent has to learn it. We're in a war — an undeclared war. We're in the selective-kill business — not the overkill. So you will know whether it's him or you. But if you don't — it will be you who dies. It's quite simple really. Let's go!"

Easy to reach now. A large cave, smooth floor. A telescopic gantry, motor-driven pulleys attached, could extend way out over the rock-face to lower a load on to the water. Plenty of bars embedded in rock for hand-holds. A loading platform next to an endless-belt loader. Two coracles still on the lifting claws.

The cave narrowed to a long, low room. Store racks one side filled with two-inch-wide lathes of bark, each piece smoothed, polished. Little flat-car, trollies the length of the bark sat on wooden rails, shiny with use. A winching machine to pull the trollies up. A braking shoe to hold them steady on the down trip. Tub-shaped trollies interspersed in the line. From a passage to the right, a sound of thudding, not rhythmic, uneven, almost laborious. Occasionally a clink of metal against metal.

Sama Paru made signs. They wrecked the winching machine with two well-placed near-silent explosive packs, then jammed the trollies before severing the cables in many places. Sama moved, beckoning, treading as if on eggshells into the passage. At a bend, he halted, hand raised warningly. They peered around.

A cavern of orange light and flickering shadows — yellowish dust wreathing. A tangy, soda-like smell, not unpleasant. But all else was.

Three guards, one with a gun, two with whips. White men — big, craggy-rough. And about a score of islanders — digging, digging, digging. As one slowed, so the whip lashed down.

Sama Paru's eyes glittered. Randy Kovac's belly froze, but he nodded in understanding.

Sama stood at the entrance.

"Y-Shan-U!" he cried.

The guard with the gun whirled, barrel levelling. Sama shot him

between the eyes.

The thudding ceased, shovels clattered down. A score of sobbing voices chanted: "Y-Shan-U! Y-Shan-U!"

"Drop the whips," Sama called.

One man was slow. "Who the hell are you? You'll die for this!"

Sama's attention was on this man. Randy saw the other guard's gun sliding up from its holster. The barrel was clear when Randy fired. The man was flung back, staggered, fell. Two islanders grabbed shovels and hammered his head in fury.

The third guard leapt, clasped an islander in front of him as he drew his gun, fired over the man's shoulder. The bullet spanged dust from the passage floor. Sama's sleep gun was now clear. So was Randy's. He had reacted lightning fast. Both fired together. One dart hit the islander. The other hit the guard in the shoulder. It threw his gun-arm off-target.

Sama yelled to the islanders: "Come!" and hustled Randy along the passage. At the end, Randy was sick.

Sama ignored him and silenced the jabbering islanders.

"One," he said, holding up a finger. "One who speaks as I speak. Understand?"

A short, bow-legged man came forward, sweat pouring, dust-caked, but grinning widely, like a gaping pea-pod. "I am very good speaker. Much schoolman, with the books and the pens. You not American?"

"European — you savvy?"

"Ah yes. France, Germany, Holland, England — on the map I see."

"What is your name?"

"Hiho."

"Okay, Hiho — you speak. I listen. Tell me what is from here to the valley?"

Hiho was quick. He understood what was needed. Then Sama said: "You stay here. We send for you when it is safe."

"No, please!" Hiho jabbered at his companions. Several ran back into the cavern, returning with armfuls of shovels and the two whips.

Sama shrugged. "It's your war as well as ours. Let's go get 'em!"

The story wasn't difficult to piece together. April Dancer, Mark Slate and their European colleagues had experienced this THRUSH pattern of divide and rule many times before. Sometimes it was a society or organization founded by sincere do-gooders that THRUSH infiltrated — first by buying in, then by appointing their own men to key positions. At times they worked with speed, at others they moved slowly. The end was the same. THRUSH had a "front" behind which they could prepare their current project.

On this occasion, it happened to be an island in the sun. Small, unimportant historically or economically, with a population much inter-married, simple, and mainly unambitious. A happy people, though not without their family squabbles, not caring for political or other dogmas, and following their own patterns of tribal religions and traditional loyalties to one Chief, who acted as High Priest, Prime Minister, Judge and benign Father-figure.

Numbers of missionaries, visiting Westerners, social workers, had all left their mark in superficial ways, but nothing had really changed the pattern of the centuries. The islanders still lived in their long houses, still interbred and intermarried. Their harbour was rebuilt. A Palaga company set up a warehouse and several stores. The islanders learned about money, but it didn't affect them very much until the school was built and George Lodori became their first resident teacher. Education changed the children and the younger parents. An increase of tourism sharpened their commercial interest. The tiny radio station had been a nine-day wonder, but not until a few youngsters were trained to operate it did the islanders grasp even a part of its importance.

April Dancer could not assess the actual date when THRUSH first became active on Taradata, but there was no doubt that George Lodori was their first contact. Chief Kuala remembered how Lodori had come back from a holiday on the mainland a changed man — and had a lot of money too. Perhaps he'd always been a THRUSH supporter? Perhaps that was the time they bought him? It didn't really matter. THRUSH was now on the island via a key person in the community. Perhaps Lodori had sold them an idea, himself unaware of its potential when linked to THRUSH aims? That too had happened before to inventors, designers, creators of new processes, instruments and

machines.

The build-up progressed by careful stages. Lodori was completely trusted by Chief Kuala. The project of exporting the traditional small boats of Taradata launched. THRUSH paid high prices for these early boats. The islanders had never seen so much money for what seemed to them such very easy work. And slowly their way of life was transformed. Machinery was brought in. Younger men were taught to use it. The chief's young cousin Tom-Tom was made overseer of this part of the work, given power and money. With true nepotism he gathered his own family around him, giving them the well-paid jobs. And THRUSH policy became implemented more and more.

Then came the Padracks to teach selected islanders, chosen by Tom-Tom, a new form of work with chemicals and instruments, such as microscopes, slides, testing retorts, and simple routine laboratory work. Visitors became more frequent, stayed longer in the new house built by Lodori and the Padracks next to the laboratory at the end of the work sheds.

High pay was offered and training given to operate machines tunnelling into the headland beneath the Taramao forest. Chief Kuala's authority grew less and less, although the traditional respect of his islanders remained. But the pattern of daily work now became established, with Tom-Tom the leader of all those employed.

THRUSH allowed Kuala to remain as chief, providing he didn't try to interfere with their plans. For a long time he wasn't able to, because his people never had it so good. But THRUSH slowly withdrew the high pay and easy working conditions until the islanders found themselves working almost as slave labour under the now powerful Tom-Tom, who was using his chosen henchmen as overseers.

The production pressure had increased over the previous six months as the islanders' freedom became even more restricted. The one occasion when, by tradition, everyone stopped work was when *Island Traveller* docked. Then, previously, everyone had put on their gayest sarongs, the girls fixed flowers in their hair, the pearl divers swam around the pleasure boats — though there wasn't much of a pearl-diving industry since the oyster beds had been depleted by disease a few years back — and a high holiday enjoyed by all. Now, the islanders were not allowed to leave their work. The harbour area was fenced off. Those who did not work under Tom-Tom were threatened by his guards if they dared to approach the dock.

Chief Kuala immediately protested, declaring he would tell his people to stop working. But he and those who openly supported him were swiftly overpowered and taken to the new huts which Lodori had said were to be storehouses but which, obviously, had been prepared for just such a purpose. THRUSH domination of the island was complete. So was the disillusionment of the majority of its people.

U.N.C.L.E. agents had proof of this as the chief led the way through the first long house. The islanders flocked around him. He spoke to them quietly. The men sent the women and children to the far end of the house, collected their serengatas — a sharp-edged, sword-shaped piece of wood fashioned from roots of the tara tree, not unlike a panga — and followed their chief to the next house.

Division of the islanders into Tom-Tom's followers and Chief "Boy" Kuala's loyalists had become so fierce in the past weeks that the families no longer shared the same long house. Thus the success of THRUSH policy now assisted April, her colleagues and Kuala's men in speeding through the valley, collecting followers as they went. A few young men, caught as they visited girlfriends, were beaten up by the serengatas and roughly passed back to the women, who had formed themselves into a sort of corps of protective- custody guards, under the leadership of Kuala's wife.

Kuala admitted being puzzled by the rapid growth of Tom-Tom's power during the past week or so. In the next house they discovered that Mareet, Kuala's old enemy, had been kept prisoner up in Taramao since he had protested about conditions. He had died and been buried up there — leaving Tom-Tom in full power.

As they approached the long houses where Tom-Tom's followers now lived, April said to the Chief: "You have enough men now to do what has to be done. We will leave you to deal with your own people. Drive them back the way we have come and leave us to settle the real villains. We'll circle the long houses and go through the workshops."

Mark said: "How about us taking half a dozen hefty lads to wreck the workshops as we go? Save us time."

"Yes. That is good," Kuala agreed. "We want no more of this slaving. If the tools are smashed, my people can start again in our own ways. I will give you time to go past their houses. They do not suspect anything. You can hear them chanting. They are not allowed to leave the houses until dawn. The guards stay with them. Tom-Tom is so sure of his control that he has no one watching outside."

"Where will he be?" Mark asked.

Kuala smiled. "I know where he will be. I am going to Tom-Tom myself. I will bring him back on his knees. I leave you to deal with your people. You leave me to deal with mine."

As April, Mark, Lars and Kazan set off, Kazan whispered:

"I think there is going to be one sorry Tom-Tom!"

They reached the workshops — long, open-sided huts with centre benches, backed by racks containing the bark strips and moulding tools. Small hand presses were spaced along the benches. This made a crude but effective production line.

April said : "Mark and I will go this side — you two the other side. We want the tara plant processing shop, then the laboratory. With any luck, Sama and Randy should be through the tunnels by the time we reach there."

She had passed across the shadow between the buildings when figures leapt on them from the deeper shadows at the side.

They were snared in fishing nets and rolled in these until their arms and legs tangled in the folds. The fiat blades of serengatas slammed on their heads. Wisely, they gave up struggling. A fact which probably saved their lives.

CHAPTER TEN: FLAMES OF TARA

The THRUSH initial advantage of using and exploiting a simple, almost primitive people now turned into a major disadvantage for them. Chief Kuala's followers overpowered Tom-Tom's men, who anyway were swiftly discouraged by their womenfolk when family began beating up family. Squabbles were one thing, outright violence an alien way of settling them. Even grandmothers and aunts clouted a few heads of their younger relatives. Ancient traditions made short work of THRUSH'S disruptive policies. Finally there were as many women as men engaged in smashing the workshops to bits.

April and Mark heard the rending and smashing hubbub as their captors dumped them on the floor, then ran off — obviously to report. Mark spoke into his communicator. "Mark to Kazan — we are temporarily tied up. Two islanders heading for boss-men. Intercept if

you can."

April eased her hands free of the net folds, drew out a blade from the pocket kit, slashed the mesh and climbed through. She removed her skull-protector and ran a comb through her hair before slashing Mark's net. He scrambled free as Kazan's voice sounded in their earpieces.

"We have dropped them with dart guns. Are you okay?"

"Okay now," said April. "Proceed to far end. Try to link up with Sama Paru. Leave the laboratory section to us."

Dr. Lodori, the Padracks and their scientist guest had not equipped themselves with a modern electronic communications system. This was unusual in a THRUSH project, because they, like U.N.C.L.E., made full use of the latest systems. But such systems need people skilled in their operation to be effective, and the Taradata islanders were not trained to use them.

So Tom-Tom was whipped away before he could send a runner to warn his bosses. The two guards who had trapped April and Mark gave no thought to the fact that these strangers might be fully equipped for an assault task — perhaps to the extent of wearing skull-protectors. Both had dropped at the first blow, a quite normal agent practice to put the attacker off guard, assess the odds, and decide countermeasures. The simple guards had thought one honk on the head was enough to put them out.

THRUSH had wired the tunnels under Taramao Point for light and power from the generator, but had not troubled to put in a two-way loudspeaker system, or inter-com circuit. Evidently they had not considered possible any attack by outsiders, assuming their control of the islanders to be sufficient to ensure their own safety. It gave April and Mark much glee and a certain smug arrogance to observe these THRUSH shortcomings.

"I sense the woman's touch," said April. "Or a woman-ish man. But I'll plump for Lucy Padrack being the dominant organizer here. A man would have made sure of an adequate electronic alarm and communications system. He'd have trained a nucleus of islanders to work them."

"Thought they were safe behind the harbour. No strangers unless the boat was in," said Mark. "Then they place guards to bar the way."

"Unforgivable, and criminally slack," said April heavily. "I'd shoot the

lot of 'em, if they worked for me."

Mark smothered laughter. "Darling — what are you getting upset about?"

She grinned. "I'm envious of the islanders. At least they are having a smashing time!"

"Ouch! Well, let's you and I investigate this processing section."

"Where the hell are they?" said April as they moved on. "Can't any of the bosses hear the row going on behind us?"

"Obviously not."

They entered the last section. This was long, narrow, more sophisticated than the workshops yet still by modern factory standards, very primitive. Three vats, waist-high along one side, with wheeled superstructures on rails carrying spring-loaded mesh trays. Some tara plant leaves lay on these trays, still damp. Large, yellow-brown, lace-veined, delicate-looking. Moonlight slanting on one tray made the leaves appear translucent.

April inspected the fluid, testing it with her finger, then sniffing. Mark joined her. He too made tests on the liquid and plant leaves.

"Alcohol is part of it. What's the slightly bitter taste — alum?"

April rubbed the liquid between finger and thumb. Tested again. "No, not alum. I'd guess at acetylsalicylic acid."

"Aspirin!" Mark grinned. "Perhaps the tara plant has headaches? There's a volume tester and other gadgets over there."

They moved across. April inspected some drums mounted on power-driven turntables.

"Separators," she announced, and checked the containers. "Powder? No — earth. No — earth is drawn out — here's the waste bin." They crossed to a row of shaping machines. The pan-shaped moulds were the size of a coracle. She tested the powdery residue. "Same stuff. They extract a yellowish powder from the soil, soak the leaves in that solution, bond several together with those heat presses in the centre, coat them with the powder, then shape them to fit inside the coracles. Why, Mark — why? If it's drugs, why not extract the substance they need and export that?"

Mark was busy placing plastic explosive charges. "Let the medics work it out. Our job is S.F.D. — remember?"

"Yes — okay."

They worked quietly, then ran from the section. Ahead of them, lights glowed in a glass-windowed building — the only stone-built structure they had seen. Through these windows they could see the Padracks and a bald, thin-faced man working at some papers. In another room — a white room filled with laboratory equipment — Cheval leaned over an assembly of phials and glass tubes.

Mark pointed. "Do you recognize the type of window?"

"They appear to be double-glazed — and the glass is slightly opaque. Why?"

"They're sona windows — a new sound-proofing process. No wonder they can't hear anything! The door's over that side." He drew his gun. "Shall we go straight in?"

Kazan's voice came urgently: "We can see you, but we're in a trap — armed guards on each side of us. They don't look too expert with their guns. We are keeping dart guns palmed. Will shoot our way out. Go on to your objective. Over and out."

Light from the windows prevented April and Mark seeing beyond the building to where Kazan and Lars were, below the black hump of Taramao Point.

"If we move to assist, they'll see us before we see them," said Mark.

"We go in," said April, drawing her gun. "We might need hostages."

They ran forward, aiming for the door and crossing diagonally past the front of the building.

Suddenly the earth blew up in their faces. Pressure waves slammed their ears, sickening pain filled their stomachs.

"Oh, Gawd!" Mark thought in these speeding seconds. "We've been booby-trapped! Sorry, April, old dear!" Then the dark mist swam down over him — down into earth-warm silence.

April thought: "Oh, hell! A trap! Sorry, Mark, I let you down. I should've known it was too easy!" She didn't feel her face hit the earth.

There were six guards in the large cave near the end of the sloping exit. Hiho jabbered softly.

"Four are our brothers who have become our enemies. We will slay them."

"Quit — you bloodthirsty little man!" said Randy. "They've got guns. We don't want you to suffer any more." He looked at Sama Paru. "Fun ploy?"

Sama nodded. "You think you're quick enough?"

Randy grinned. "Now's my chance to find out."

"Go," said Sama. "I cover. Keep to the left wall."

Randy trod to the cave. The six men squatted around a low table, eating from bowls. Three guns rested against the table. Three whips against the wall.

"Good evening," said Randy. "Can you direct me to the Eiffel Tower, please?"

Six startled faces lifted. Twelve eyes glared with amazed fright. Three hands snatched the guns. Randy fired from the hip. Two guards slid to the table. The third fired as Sama fired. Then a press of little men bowled past Randy, led by Hiho. Shovels clanged and whips slashed. Sama cried: "Enough! Out — all of you, out!"

Randy marshalled them clear as Sama ripped the cover off the power-circuit box. He picked up a rifle, crashed the wooden butt into the switches. Brilliant sparks, followed by an orange glow, filled the cave.

They went on down, seeing moonlight flaring in the opening, and emerged on a plateau above a window-lighted building, to see Kazan and Lars standing between two groups of islanders. All seemed frozen to the ground. A small dust cloud was puttering up from the far side of the building. Beyond it, a long house erupted in a succession of explosions.

Then little Hiho and his mates came swarming out. The islanders on each side of Kazan and Lars saw them and pelted away into the darkness. Hiho and his men split into two groups and, yelling like banshees, waving shovels, raced after them.

"You see!" Lucy Padrack gloated. "My safety line against the natives was worth the money, after all. You're such a fool, Simon. A mean fool, at that. Too expensive, you said. Well, look what we've caught!"

April Dancer, huddled in dizzy-sick ache, heard the lovely vibrant voice and tried not to sneeze as dusty earth tickled her nostrils. She was lying on a hard, cool surface. Inside? Must be. She kept her eyes closed.

"And what have we caught?" said Simon Padrack. "Two young fools from the ship, snooping around. How did they get past the guards?"

Dr. Lodori raised from stooping over Mark Slate.

"You blithering fools! You imbeciles! This man is an U.N.C.L.E. agent. I thought you told me you'd got rid of that agent in the crew?"

"We did," said Padrack. "He escaped, and he certainly didn't come back to the ship. That is not the man."

Cheval came in. Surveyed the scene.

"I warned you, Lodori — and you too, Padrack," he said. "I will not be a party to violence while I am here."

"Oh no!" Lucy sneered. "But you agreed to trick that little slut into taking a ride into the hills."

"Only because you believed she was a too-curious writer, and you assured me that she would be held up only long enough for her to miss the boat. Today, you tell me that your men aboard the ship are under arrest for mutiny and the murder of your colleague, Maleski. I do not like the way things are happening. I do not like it at all. My work is more important than such absurdities."

"It is nothing, Andre," said Lodori soothingly. "Some misunderstandings, that is all. But you must not be too squeamish, my friend. Our secret work has to be protected, and that means your work too. Leave us to deal with this foolishness and go on with your tests."

"They are finished," said Cheval. He smiled at Lodori. "You are a very clever man, George."

"Positive?" Lodori cried excitedly. "You found every test positive? Ah,

mon vieux, that is wonderful — wonderful! The climax of my years of work!"

"You deserve your success," said Cheval. "I have signed the test sheets and the analysis records. I will write my report tomorrow. You can be very proud."

"Success? Wonderful? Proud?" Lucy said furiously. "And what about us? Didn't we make it possible? Didn't we believe in his crack-brained idea and hock ourselves to the hilt before we got the backing? Didn't we organize all this? You couldn't have done it without us."

"Lucy is right," said her husband. "But I would remind you all that this success to which we all have contributed is empty and worthless without the organization that made all else possible."

"That is true," said Cheval. "I congratulated you on their behalf because your success is theirs, my dear George. No one man is bigger than that cause for which we all work."

"No!" Lodori shouted. "No, no, no! I will not have it. This is mine, mine! I shall take the papers and..." He began to run to the doorway leading to the laboratory.

"Yes," said Cheval quietly.

Simon Padrack shot Lodori twice in the back.

"A pity," said Cheval. "Poor George spent too long alone on his little island. He forgot there is a world to conquer out there."

Another gun spat once. Simon Padrack's gun dropped as blood spurted from his wrist.

"Just stay very still," said April Dancer.

"Hullo, darling!" said Mark Slate from the opposite corner. "Had a good sleep? Aha, naughty!" He slashed Cheval across the back of the neck.

Cheval staggered back into the room.

Mark looked at him. "You said 'yes' to a man's murder as if you were ordering another drink. And your eyes enjoyed it."

"So you saw it?" said April.

"Full view," said Mark. "As Chas would say: we've got a nice bunch here."

Lucy Padrack cried: "My husband will bleed to death! I must get a dressing." She moved fast and had the parasol in her hand before April could turn without coming between Mark and the two men. Mark couldn't fire for fear of hitting April.

The stiletto clicked out, slashing viciously. It sliced across April's upper arms, severing cloth, missing her eyes by inches. She could have shot to kill, but could not bring herself to do it. Even on an S.F.D., and following the selective-kill code, she hadn't the nature for actual cold killing. She snapped one shot, aiming to wound, but Lucy's arms were waving too fast as April herself ducked the blade.

Then she flung the gun smack into Lucy's face, leapt down and sideways, coming up under the parasol. In seconds she had paralysed that arm and pulled the parasol away. Lucy Padrack's eyes went wild. She screamed horribly, then, cursing and screaming, ran out into the moonlight. April snatched up her gun and raced after her. She saw the howling mob of islanders before Lucy realized they were there.

Lucy ran headlong into them. They closed around her in a milling press, shovels and whips waving and flaying. Soon, a tattered doll that once was Lucy Padrack was thrown high above their heads — to fall, lifeless, and disappear.

April faced the approaching islanders, gun poised.

"Back — get back!" She fired at the ground in front of them.

The leaders halted, wide-eyed. The others slowed behind them.

"That's it," said April. "Quiet, now — stay there." A voice called: "Okay, Miss Dancer, they won't hurt you. They're on our side!"

"You could have fooled me. Hey! Is that you, Randy Kovac?"

The four of them came out of the darkness. The islanders slowly moved aside, very quiet now, almost ashamed. They left a trampled clearing on which sprawled the remains of Lucy Padrack.

Count Kazan said: "I would not care to be the judge who has to decide who holds the greater guilt. We are told she personally killed three islanders with a parasol. I do not understand how, but…"

"I know how," said April. "Why?"

Kazan shrugged. "They were happily married."

"Ah!" said April. "And she..."

"So the little Hiho has just told me."

April said: "Sama and Randy — go help Mark." They ran into the building as a group of men pounded from the rear of it, all armed, a white-coated figure leading them, a gun in each hand.

"Oh no!" April exclaimed. "Who asked you to get in on the act?"

"At your service, miss," said Chas. "We heard gunfire so we came running."

Kazan said: "You were nearly dead."

"Yes," said April. "You took a chance, Chas."

He moved across to the islanders. A number of them dropped to their knees. Chas spoke to them quietly. Then they gathered up Lucy Padrack and marched slowly away down the valley.

Chas said: "You have no authority on this island. It is under the magisterial jurisdiction of my father. I am a sworn officer of his court. You will please surrender your guns."

"Now, look, Chas — don't come the old blarney with me..."

Chas turned to his men. "If I am attacked — Shoot to kill." He came to April, held out his hand. "There'll be no more killing or shooting on Taradata, Miss Dancer." Then speaking more quietly in his cockney voice, continued:

"Don't be a flippin' mug, girlie — I can make what you've done all nice and legal. If I don't, them Palagas — and me old Daddy, bless him — will stick you and your mates in the clink and keep you there 'til your teeth fall out."

April sighed, handed over her gun. She smiled at Kazan.

"Mr. Fix-it — island style. Do as the gent says."

Kazan shrugged again. "You're the boss."

Chas took the guns. "Is she now? Well, well! Seems you're a more important girlie than I thought. I never fancied working for a woman."

April said sweetly: "No, not one — at least four or five."

"Nasty," said Chas. "Not nice. Let's not get personal. Now — what's going on in there?"

Soon after Chas entered the building, all the lights went out. Cheval tried to escape. Padrack did get clear, then suddenly fainted — possibly from loss of blood. Moonlight was now brilliant so the lighting was not really necessary. It came on after a while.

Mark thought he'd call Chas's bluff, even though April had accepted the position. Chas then produced a police card, showing him truly to be an officer of the court of jurisdiction. A strange man, full of strange twists, but a local power. All the islanders respected him. So did Chief Kuala, who marched in with his headmen. April, Mark and their companions fumed as Chas and the chief exchanged flowery greetings. Under cover of this long-winded powwow, Mark whispered an idea to April. They passed it on to the others. Chas's seamen had taken charge of the wounded Padrack, but had left only one man to guard Cheval.

April chatted up this seaman, asking him questions about the wonderful Chas and gushing over him, drawing the man farther away from Cheval. When he glanced around, Cheval had gone. So had Kazan and Lars Carlson.

"It's all right," said April, patting the man's shoulder. "Chas told us to take him to the ship. You'll be having a whoop-up tonight, huh? Lots of dancing, drinking — I come? You like me to come?" She beckoned Sama Paru, whispered: "Get going. Contact the launch. Rendezvous with it. Surface and take off Cheval. Then go full speed for Mr. Waverly. Hand Cheval over. The charge is complicity in murder, inciting a riot — anything you like — but break Cheval."

Sama and Randy departed.

Mark had wandered into the building. April followed him.

"They're all congratulating each other," said Mark. "Kuala's men are going to fire the workshops. April, me old darling — there's something we've missed out on. Why did we lose control? Even allowing for the Lucy fiasco, we could have handled it."

"Chas," said April. "That Chas! He had tabs on how things were going.

Must have done. Then he shows up smack at the moment when he could say we weren't in control." She stormed through the laboratory, crunching broken glass, slamming aside chairs. She stood staring at the rifled filing cabinet, the clipboard with shreds of torn paper jammed under the metal. Then glared back at Mark.

"You?"

"No. I aimed to get in here, but couldn't leave Cheval and Padrack."

April looked through the window as flames streaked up in wild-searing tongues of fire. Kuala and his headmen and other islanders were gone. Chas was directing his seamen to carry Padrack to the ship. He told others to collect Lodori's body. All was quiet as he came to them, smiling. They smiled back at him.

"Kuala and his people will never forget what you have done," said Chas.

"I'm sure they won't." April still smiled.

Mark wandered about casually. "No more little boats — no more lush pickings, eh, Chas?"

Chas shrugged. "Money ain't everything, y'know. These are simple, happy people. They got a right to live their own lives."

"Oh, sure, sure!" Mark suddenly leapt from behind, pinioning Chas's arms and fixing a garotte hold on his throat. "Methinks you are a very crafty little man."

April sprang forward, searched with swift, expert actions, and pulled folded papers from inside Chas's shirt.

"How did you know they'd be there, Chas?" She flicked his nose with the papers.

Chas laughed in her face. A slightly strangled laugh. Mark eased his hold, then released Chas and stood back. Chas massaged his throat.

"You're the clever ones," he said. "You tell me. But don't forget I got a right to take anything I want as evidence."

April laughed softly. "Anything? With a whole row of files to choose from?" She glanced at the papers as she spoke. "You choose the latest and probably most important ones. The final analysis and the final

tests."

Mark rattled a metal tray containing empty phials. "On these? Oh, Granny, what quick eyes you've got! They only arrived this morning."

"You ain't the only ones with a little brain," said Chas. "Very cocky, you youngsters these days."

April exclaimed: "Lodori — of course!" She operated the communicator. "Channel D, please. April Dancer calling Mr. W. Priority." When he answered, she said: "Full report later, sir. Am now requesting full information on Dr. George Lodori of Taradata — minor character. Background — war record." She waited, listening carefully. "Thank you, sir. Have you received our message re the package we despatched via Kazan? You have? Good! Thank you." She closed the communicator.

"I'll have to get myself one of those," said Chas. "Cute, ain't they?"

"So are you," said April. "Dr. George Lodori was a prisoner-of-war at the same time as you, in the same camp. How else could you know that final tests were taking place as soon as Cheval arrived? How else, except from Lodori, could you know anything about this angle? Not from your islander chums. Most of them don't know a test tube from a light bulb — or how to work a phone. That's why there are no modern communications — except the radio. Who works the radio, Chas? One of your wives?"

"Nah!" Chas was scornful. "One of me sons, of course! You'll probably find out, so why not tell you. Okay, so the doc and me were old buddies." He looked at her sadly. "Did you have to let him die, miss?"

"You know Padrack shot him. Mark told you."

Mark said: "We'd been knocked out by blast from that trick prowler trap, but not badly hurt. We were lying doggo, biding our time. We're pretty used to controlling our actions under stress. But even if I'd leapt up — it would have been too late. I think Lodori was expendable. You must have had an idea he was in danger."

Chas nodded. "Out of his depth, was George. Got himself involved with big money men." He laughed cynically. "Ain't we all? But he was clever." Chas waved his hand. "At this sort of thing. He was a sick man when I brought him here years ago. That prisoner-of-war camp just about finished him. But he had peace here. Peace and sun and happy people. He took up teaching — then doctoring again — and made a

life for himself. Then 'he began this — what-you-call-em — research stuff. The islanders never got sick — not from things like you and me. George thought he'd found out why. He wanted money for equipment and suchlike. I helped all I could, but it wasn't enough. Two years ago he took a trip to find a backer. He found one. I guess they were waiting for a mug like George." He glared at April. "Well, they do, don't they? Wait for the little fellas with the big ideas but no money."

She nodded. "It's done quite often. Your friend George's last words were — 'It's mine, mine!'"

"Ah! And it was too."

"What?" said April. "What, Chas?"

He grinned, suddenly twinkling. "You find out. That's what you're paid for, ain't it?"

"We're paid," said Mark, "but our commission is paid in terms of lives saved, and the prevention of world domination by fear and exploitation of the many by the few."

"Proper little crusaders, ain't you?" The words were sarcastic, but his voice was kindly. "I see you whipped Cheval away while I was in the powwow. Maybe just as well. I've got Padrack, and I'll want your evidence — unless you're going to claim some sort of diplomatic privilege?"

"No," said April. "We could, but we won't. We'll swear affidavits saying we witnessed the murder. What about Lucy Padrack?"

"I reckon she died resisting arrest for complicity in murder," said Chas calmly. "I shed no tears for Lucy. Would you like to swear otherwise?"

April shook her head. "We might need your evidence before we can deal with Cheval." She smiled at Chas.

"Under International Law, that could be tricky for you, eh, Mark?"

"Very tricky." Mark followed her lead. "You're an officer of a court, Chas— not just an ordinary citizen. As you've been careful to prove to us. Our government and its agencies could make you travel to the other side of the world as a material witness — if they wanted to."

"And if we made certain they did," said April, smiling sweetly. "You are a man of many talents, Chas. I admire you. And I appreciate that a

long absence from your many business interests around the islands…"

"Not to mention your personal and family life," Mark interrupted.

"... would be seriously disrupted by prolonged absence," April continued. She sighed, as if very concerned over the problem. "But there are better legal brains than ours on board a certain ship not far from here. I expect they would advise us."

"They'd do more than advise," said Mark. "They'd ruddy-well order us to make sure you were available. We don't want to threaten you to come with us, but if you don't, then I think they might sort of lean on your ship with theirs and take you off. You see — the Padracks were American citizens. Oh, not very good ones, I'll admit, but that's not really the point."

Chas hitched one leg over a high stool, lit a cigarette, feathered smoke. Mark leaned against a broken cabinet, hefting his gun gently up and down. April sat on the table, knees drawn up, chin resting on them, staring at Chas, her hands wafting the papers to and fro.

"You might, and they might," said Chas at last. "But there ain't one of you could make me do anything I didn't want. Better and tougher cookies than you have tried — and failed."

"Who's talking about making you?" said Mark. "We know you don't scare."

"You're right, I don't. Likewise, I ain't a complete halfwit. You know I can't afford to leave the islands right now. And I know that you know." He shrugged. "So I trade. What's the deal?"

April waved the papers. "Your friend Lodori discovered a drug in the leaves of the tara plant. These had to be processed and pressed in a certain way so that they could travel. Numbers of them were then moulded into the coracles as an inner skin. Why such a tortuous way? Why not extract the drug here and export it in one guise or another?"

"Too bulky, for one thing. The leaves must be bonded with a special solution, as you say. They have to stay like that for at least eight weeks, but not stacked up. They must have air around them. You forgot to mention the tara root dust. That is separated from the earth and sifted over the bonded leaves. It contains a concentration of a substance found only in the tara tree roots. Useless on its own — just like the leaves are useless without it. A natural substance in a young leaf is released by the substance in a mature root, and vicky-verky.

Follow me?"

"Almost ahead of you," said April.

"Taradata is not a big island," said Mark. "But there's room to spread out a few thousand leaves."

"No go," said Chas. "George tried it. They mustn't dry out beyond a certain point. Then he found — by accident, ain't that comical? — that the tara bark, leastways the under side of it, was a natural. It stopped the leaves from breaking before they were ready, and it actually helped the drug to do what he called 'become stable and viable'."

"So why boats? Why not strips of bark?"

"Because you can't get large enough pieces of bark. It comes off in strips, and you mustn't bind the leaves into tight packaging. Okay for tiny quantities, but George's backers wanted production — big production. So they revived the native coracle industry. Seems too that there's a whole mess of laws in your country about importing plants. But they didn't bother about them little boats."

"It jells." April looked at Mark. He grinned and said:

"It might justify our expense sheets. But if they were ready to spend all they did on this set-up, why not go the limit and build an extractor plant here?" He picked up a bottle he'd put ready to collect along with other items. It was full of coarse brown flakes. "What do the victims do, Chas — crunch it for breakfast, or boil it in a teapot?"

"It don't travel like that," said Chas. "You have to pour boiling water over the whole leaf — strain the water, and drink it. Only keeps about three days before it begins to lose its effect. But once you've drunk a course of it, you don't need any more for a helluva long time. All the dosages are worked out. The islanders have drunk it for years. The leaves of the tara fern and the roots of the tara tree make smashing vegetables and juice in a fish stew."

Mark shuddered.

April said: "Your friend George should have kept it to the islanders — not let an anti-social and powerful organization get their hands on it by mixing it with cold viruses in a concentration. It's a fiendish weapon, Chas. It could wipe out half a population."

Chas stamped on his cigarette as he jumped to his feet.

"Wipe out! What the hell are you talking about?"

Mark juggled the empty phials. "Your ship brought these in."

"So what? I've brought plenty. George used them for testing."

"But these are full of virulent cold germs!" Mark exclaimed. "If they're released in concentration, thousands of people could die of congestion, pneumonia, bronchitis, or go tubercular. Our experts will tell us exactly how THRUSH intended to use them. But for my money, Chas, both you and your mate George are unscrupulous rats. I don't know why April has bothered to trade with you."

Chas stared at her. "Is he crackers? What's he talking about? Don't he know there's not a ruddy native on this island, nor on mine, nor me, nor my wives and kids, ever has a cold — is never ill with any chest complaints?" He stabbed Mark in the chest with his finger. "You sink a few gallons of George's wallop down you, and you'll never have a cold, no time, not ever — see?"

Mark goggled at April, who was scanning the sheets more closely than on her first flip through them.

"It's true," she said. "Cheval's tests were all positive.

He'd been sent to conclude Lodori's work. THRUSH was ready to move into action. Cheval has some notes here about suspending the tara substance inside mercury linings — he doesn't seem very hopeful about it, and suggests the present methods of transporting the leaf be retained pending further tests." She smiled at Chas. "Sorry we misjudged your friend — and you. It is a wonderful discovery."

"I told you," said Chas, waving his arms. "I told you!"

April nodded. "I don't think George knew either."

"Knew what?"

"That the organization he'd sold out to were going to use the tara substance to make their own people immune. Then they could spray concentrations of virus around any community they chose. They could cripple the work, the economy, and the life of any country by being the only healthy persons in that sector. The more illness there was, the more cultures their scientists would make."

"A weapon!" Chas exclaimed. "My Gawd — a weapon to destroy

people! And all George wanted was to save them." He moved to look out at the flames streaking up to the sky. When he turned back, the tears were streaming over his wrinkled brown cheeks. "Y'know something? You'll laugh like hell. George never took any money for it — not for himself. We all made money — except him." He stumbled to the door, turned. "There ain't no deal," he said. "Your people want me — I'll come to the other side of the world."

April nodded. "Thanks, Chas."

The wind blew chill from the river. The United Nations building reared dark against a cloud-scudding sky.

April and Mark pulled their coats tighter around them as they hurried into the tailor's shop below the old brownstone house. In three minutes they had passed through the secret cupboard entrance into U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

Mr. Waverly greeted them with: "Treasury are still carping about your expenses on that golden boats of Taradata affair three months ago. I'd be obliged if you'd submit revised sheets. They ask particularly about the rates of pay Mr. Slate received for his work aboard *Island Traveller*, and why he didn't work out his notice in the usual way."

Mark opened his mouth to utter a furious reply. Mr. Waverly held up his hand. "Let us remain dignified about this. After all you had a jolly jaunt on the island boat — all that sun and sea air. They are human enough to be a trifle jealous, so let us humour them."

April said: "I've redone mine four times. Why shouldn't you?"

"Sweet," said Mark. "You're so sweetly sympathetic."

Mr. Waverly flipped a pasteboard across to April. "That might interest you, if you are free this evening."

She read: "The Ibrox Chemical Co. invite you to the inaugural dinner at Skyway Arms Penthouse, 7.30 for 8.00, of the George Lodori Foundation. Guest of honour is Charles Henry Arthur Salisbury, Esq., representing the Foundation."

"Chas!" she cried. "The old devil!"

Mark peered over her shoulder at the card. "Well, I'll be damned! He's really among the top brass, isn't he?"

"Among?" said Mr. Waverly, raising his eyebrows. "He is the top brass. He's just granted Throx the rights to manufacture the Tara Cold Prophylactic under a special trade name for an advance royalty of two million dollars."

"Y'know something?" said Mark, imitating the Chas cockney voice. "I'll ask him to make out my expense sheets. Those Treasury wallahs have never met a real pirate!"

"You could be right," said April. "They should be grateful they don't have a Chas on the strength!"

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